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THE VOID OF WAR


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THE VOID OF WAR

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Letters from Three Fronts

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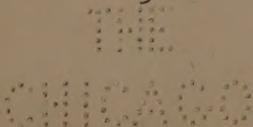
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TO

JOHN BUCHAN

“THE ONLIE BEGETTER”

THESE LETTERS ARE INSCRIBED
WITH ALL THE GOOD WILL
OF A GRATEFUL HEART

*"A Storm of Blood is sweeping o'er the world,
And all our lives are overwhelmed therein,
And nought of happy yesterday remains."*

THE DOWAGER OF JERUSALEM, ACT III.

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PART I
The Heart of England

THE VOID OF WAR

I. FIRST IMPRESSIONS: KEMMEL

Château de Noère

Somewhere in France

I. DIFFICULTIES

I expect it is going to be difficult to write to you. At least it is certainly very difficult to begin. You must not think that I have not tried. I have already written you three letters from here, but each of them I have had to tear up. They were oddly dreadful. You would have thought that with such a subject as this fighting front of ours it would have been easy to write. But no! One becomes so crowded up and congested with things to say that at first one cannot get any of them said clearly. Anyhow, large turgid elephants of sentences do not help; and it does not take long out here to strip away all such nonsense. One must not try to rise to the subject; one must get possessed by it before one can do any good.

I do not know where to begin. Of course, I could wait until the whole work was finished, and then sit down to compile a nicely architected, orderly sequence of impressions. One could make a regular book that way, but I think it *would* be book-making. It will be much better if I write from time to time, as things happen, and try to ravel out my feelings as I come upon the knots. After all, that is what you want, I suppose? I cannot give you in-

formation, or talk about strategies. You have read all that a thousand times over. The only point and value of my writing is to tell you how the whole thing strikes me; but at least I must try to give my letters headings and references, so that if you keep them, and ever try to read them again, you will have signposts to help you find your way.

The whole thing is difficult. Of course, everything I have seen and felt so far is still only a chaos of superficialities. I am afraid, if I start putting down my impressions now, that they will all be external and dull and unreal, word-daubs without feeling. I have not got behind yet; at present I am still in the open-eyed stage, merely seeing things and people, in such multitudes that I cannot yet see through into the ideas. One splashes in a welter of facts, to keep from drowning in them. For the moment I am like a child at a fair; my danger is of running to you with every new thing I find.

2. THE GAS-MASK

Perhaps the first salient moment comes when you try on your tin hat and gas-mask. Even in theory the gas-mask is a dreadful thing. It stands for one's first flash of insight into man's measureless malignity against man. However, one has no time to follow out any such high thought. The actual getting into those grisly goggles is quite sufficiently unpleasant in itself. The various contraptions, the mask, the tubes, the multiplicity of ribbons, all gruesomely suggest the apparatus of ether, and have the faint, horrible smell of india-rubber that one associates with operations.

I should be very sorry to depend on getting into the ap-

paratus in the four seconds allowed. (Anyhow, in the field, one would have to take off one's tin hat to do it; so that, while protecting your lungs against gas, you are laying open your skull to shrapnel.) There are loopings-up and hookings and buttonings: then violently into the bag goes your projected chin, and wildly over your head you lug the rest of the mask, and scrabble with its strings and elastic, and grope with your mouth for a little stinking teat which eludes you from side to side, only less hard to capture than the nose-clip with which you ultimately secure your nostrils. And then only may you stop and pant and feel moderately secure. After which you mark your own particular bag, so as to be sure of a valve and mask unslobbered by any one else. And this is what our scientific civilization has come to, that this should be the necessary inevitable routine, before going out into the blessed air.

3. RURAL TRANQUILLITY

Another thing that gets hold of me from the first is the ironical tranquillity of the country. Picardy is very lovely: wooded and fertile, with rolling open lines of ups and downs. It might often be Wiltshire, but for the lack of hedges. The war is not as evident here, and not as actual, as in any ten minutes of a London street. One seems hundreds of miles farther from it, instead of hundreds of miles nearer, and on its very verge, until you notice that the villages look neglected, sad and silent, and that all their labour is being done by women and little boys and grandfathers. This country has lost its soul; all the men are gone elsewhere.

4. ENTER SOLDIERS

But, bit by bit, the scene changes, and actualities become more evident. The roads are crowded with traffic — soldiers, guns, carts, and lorries in strings that seem unending. And among these, tightly wedged into the solid, moving phalanx, there is the local parson in his shandrydan, or two monumental decent bourgeoises, in black bonnets and moustaches, going upon their business in the tiniest little ass-cart you ever saw, drawn by the tiniest little ass. Everywhere there are troops and traffic, soldiers strolling in the streets, soldiers exercising, soldiers returning from the front, or going up to it in long, slow trains, and shouting and waving and singing to you as they go by. And all of them English. And all of them so red with that sappy English health that you never see in any other race. They make quite a new note in the landscape. I should like all our gloom-mongers to come out here and judge for themselves how things really are, instead of imagining them as they would like to prove them, to suit their case. Of course, one does not see the imbecile griggishness which is so vexatious at home in the papers — but as for weariness and depression! However, all this is a mere preliminary notion. I have only seen the outside so far — swinging bodies of men, and red, hale faces, and clear eyes. Perhaps it is nothing to go on, but it is something to have. You understand that this is only a jumble of flashes?

5. FROM A HILLTOP

Devastation and the war-zone come next. It is mere odds and ends of outlines to me so far. I went up a

hill first, and there was a wonderful view, but I cannot put anything of it together as yet. Hills are very rare in this open country, but there are two or three abrupt little lonely rises, that dominate Ypres in the distance and the fighting front away beyond. You go up steeply, and it is all green scrub and coppice again. But lost among the bushes there are dug-outs. When you get to the top you find a gaunt plateau. The trees are dead, and everything has been ploughed up with shell-fire. You go up and down among hills and hollows of bare ochre-coloured earth, and fresh greenery is sprouting round the blasted tree-trunks. This was a pleasure park once, and on the edge of the hill there stood a casino. There is nothing left of it now except the ruin of a big square red-brick tower, all torn to pieces. A bear used to live in it, but where he has gone to now I could not find out.

6. HILLS AND THE WAR

This hill commands everything, but the view is of such a vastness that it baffles one's understanding. Down below there is our own war-zone lying all along the distance. It is like the mapped-out camp of a whole people, with roads like little trails of cotton, and tiny trains creeping about on what looks like a big brown moorland. And out beyond that there is a swept desert of dead trees and desolateness. It looks quite empty and lifeless; but now and then you see flashes like sparks from concealed batteries. And away beyond again, there are the hazy, purple levels that still belong to the Boches, with other hills behind, vanishing into dimness. And you begin to get an idea, here, of the importance of small hills like these in the

war. Every hundred-foot hillock won is a big victory, driving the Boche back and back towards the last of all, behind which there will be nothing for him to make a stand on any more, but only the plain of Flanders. These little advances seem so very little when one reads about them; but once one gets up on to a place like this, one begins to understand more what their significance really is. This war is a matter of masses, not of heights; huge peoples and huge country, but small persons and small eminences.

7. DEATH'S HUNTING PARK

Down below the hill the landscape is still a crowded camp, away to the very fighting front. I do not quite know yet why it is such an exhilarating sight. And then suddenly you pass out of the zone of life, and go bumping along a jaded road a little farther, over a wild and wicked ugly desolation. It is all a dismal sea of weeds, deep and dull-coloured and rank, with here and there a spark of poppy or corn-flower. The easiest way to walk is to go along one of the little light railways that feed the actual front. Otherwise it is nothing but shell-holes and pools full of green slime, with all sorts of hidden pitfalls, and unexploded mines, and wrecked Boche sandbags lying about and looking like what one imagines the sodden grey débris or corpses must be. And where it is bare the sandy, pale soil dries up nastily in a tortoise-shell crust, flaking and peeling as if the fly-blown land had got a vile skin-disease. You would not think there was any life going on here; but there is; lurking everywhere, in abandoned German dug-outs and concreted dens. And in the most unexpected places, carefully hidden, you come on the big guns, point-

ing out over the low ridge ahead. When they fire it is a very different thing from reading about it or seeing it in films. There is a splitting roar and a dizzying flash, and then a long, crooning whistle going away and away out over the horizon in a fading undulation of sound.

That is my first sight and my first impression of the front. You see, it is a mere string of snapshots — quick, quick, before my mind's eyes are switched on to something else. I hope that coherence will come as I go along, but meanwhile I must say what comes as I come to it without pretending more.

Yours

R. F.

II. FIRST PERCEPTIONS: ARRAS

Château de Noère

(I am not going to date my
letters; they will happen
about once a week)

I. THE COMFORT OF BEAUTY

I have seen a great deal more now, and appreciated some of the things I have seen, so that I can get to work again. Not that, even yet, I begin to see the thing that really haunts me all the time, and keeps me, somehow, in such an odd state of happiness among miseries. But anyhow, what I do see is getting certainly more settled down, and I am helped out by to-day, too. It has been so very glorious — pearly and blue and gold, with lowering clouds and rich colourings of sapphire and violet shifting across the distances far and far, of fields and woods. Do not think I mean to bore you with being picturesque and “precious” about scenery, but it is odd how I find myself clinging out here, to the obvious “beauties of nature”; they are an enormous relief and help; they are something that no amount of war can take away. Something that will always be beautiful, and always be there, even when you and I and all of us are neither any more. So away went I, in this wonderful radiance, up and down the illuminated waves of the landscape, in and out, and roundabout, like a clue-less Theseus in the labyrinths of the Picardy vales, until at last, in an umbrageous hollow, which I will not name because I cannot, we suddenly turned a corner and drew up short.

2. TANKS

It was a park of tanks, a huge zoo of fabulous-looking iron monsters, by hundreds lined up round the hedges of their fields! I felt a momentary shock that I had brought no buns, so homely and decent looked these rows behind rows of patient behemoths. But hardly had I alighted, and absorbed the staggering fact of my whereabouts, than a further shock obliterated even that, and wiped out the tanks, and carried me whirling across the world. For there came along a flash of blue, and then another, of a blue strangely familiar, yet grotesquely unexpected here. Abruptly, violently, I was back upon the northern plains of China, jogging along from dawn to dusk over the loess lands of Shensi or Kansu, and through grey little walled cities filled with just such twinkling, ruddy faces as these. And here they all were again, in a Picardy valley, in attendance upon tanks.

3. AWAY TO CHINA

For several minutes the shock really did take me between wind and water. I could not talk very coherently to anybody, nor study very intelligently the insides of the tanks in their gigantic hangars; I did so fiercely want to be once more out of all this, and away into the peace of Asia. And I had a terrified wonder all the time whether I might not at any corner hear the voice of Elder Brother, or the Groom, or Old Ai. If I had, it would, as the Americans say, have "broken me all up." However, no actual old friend appeared, but they were all old friends really. For these were not slim and furtive pussy-footed Southerners;

they were just the fellows that I knew, the jolly lads of the North, always ready to laugh and be friendly.

4. CIVILIZATION

I like the poetic justice of finding them here, too. It strikes home in the very bull's-eye of one's brain, to find the oldest of civilized races — or the only one — visibly and actually taking its part against Kultur. It is a good omen, and there is a beautiful irony about putting China and the tanks together. Here are these uncouth great engines, the very latest word in the mechanism of massacre, and in attendance on them, laughing and singing, the representatives of that race to which we owe almost all the mechanism we have, the race which has invented the origins of everything we are, yet which itself has always rested content to go as far as convenience required, and no farther.

But you have suffered often enough from my passion for what I take to be the ideals of Asia; you cannot wonder if all my emotions leap at the sight of Chinese tending tanks. Progress and civilization mean to us only an advance in the material of physical comfort for ourselves or discomfort for other people — trains, telephones, tanks, tubes; the confusion is as old as Christendom, between comfort and happiness, the ideal and the machine. We have, of course, been on the wrong tack, in fact, for a thousand years, but I think people in general are beginning to realize the error. At least the darkened world is all astir with doubts and wonders. Mr. Wells's new kindness to God is a fair symptom that the times of error, besides being very evil, are also waxing late.

5. TANKS AT HOME

Altogether I have no doubt that this war is turning every one to thinking; otherwise, indeed, what would be the use of it? Meanwhile, I take you back to the tanks. Do not fancy that the Chinese play any part with these, except that of coolies and fetchers and carriers in the hangars. (Though I should not be surprised if they came to be even better than we are at *camouflage* if they are allowed to try their hand. It is a game that would exactly suit them, and once they are interested they always improve on their model.) Dazed as Sheba's Queen, I wandered on through a long succession of these hangars, filled with innumerable multitudes of parts and pieces, all to me alike unintelligible. But the huge, massive orderliness of the whole scene is in itself overwhelming. You might take it as a microcosm of the war itself. The long, high-arched dimness of each hangar is full of life; trolleys come and go on little rails, Chinese sit singing at their task of tagging camouflage nets, or run errands for some commanding soldier who knows no word of their language. But he gets along with his new allies quite easily all the same; they are a good crowd to handle, these Shantung fellows, as bright and sharp as needles, if they are decently treated and joked with, and allowed to be interested in their work. Here and there, in corners or separate sheds, are invalid tanks themselves, like trunkless sick elephants, waiting to be looked after; on one of them you can still read in Russian its supposed Russian destination, painted on its flank to mislead, in the days when the secret of the tanks and their purpose was still being kept in the dark.

6. THE FOOTLESS HORROR

But most of them are outside in the fields, some sheeted and some bare, monstrous and prehistoric in their rows. They really are terrifying things, oppressively evil and ominous. They daunt one's imagination to such an extent that I should always have the instinct to run away if I saw a tank advancing down upon me, even if I knew quite well it was a perfectly friendly tank that was bringing me tea. And I think I realize why it is they are so dreadful. Humanity has an old ancestral horror of everything that moves otherwise than on feet or wheels. That is the only choice for all respectable decent movables; we hate slugs and snakes and snails, for instance, and everything that goes uncannily on its belly (women, being the older half of us, have that hatred even stronger than men). And it is for the same reason that one's primitive instinct loathes the tanks. They break the law of foot-or-wheel; it makes them unrighteous and frightening, merely in themselves, without a thought of their guns and terrors. In fact, it is obvious to compare them to slugs: neither has anything apparent to move with, yet they do move.

E pur si muove: it is this that makes them so malign.

7. THE TANK CONVEYS

I do not feel that they waddle, as John Buchan says: their footless advance is ponderous, even, and smooth — exactly like the unctuous, inexorable advance of the great bulks that develop upon you in nightmare. As one climbs inside, however, one has no such comparisons, but rather feels as if one were prosaically getting into a 'bus. A 'bus

not built for passengers, though: one crouches, and clutches, and braces one's feet, and clings passionately to any projection that comes handy (usually it is a boiling water-pipe), as off the thing goes lumbering. Over the ground it monumentally grinds; it is filled with clangour and roar, and emits eldritch screeches as it goes: the pandemonium is deafening, and as it turns it has a sleek, horrible effect of skidding. Anyhow, it is not from inside that you best appreciate the marvellousness of a tank: there you are merely deafened, dithered, and "churned to a pummy."

8. THE TANK PERFORMS

But imagine some music-hall on Olympus, and the time come for a tank to do its "turn." Before it there is a deep trench, or pit, more than thirty feet across, and as many deep. The rounded rhomboidal mass of Behemoth sits leadenly on the far side, lifting his blunted nose. Then, with a jangling roar, the monster starts. "Without the smallest plunge or caper" he advances implacably towards the trench; his nose hangs over, his fore-quarters, half his body, more. Behemoth's centre of gravity must lie incredibly far back; for it seems a long age, and a monstrous miracle of magic, as he hangs out across the trench. One shivers in endless anticipation of the critical instant when the inevitable happens, and Behemoth nose-dives into the depths with a cataclysmal crash. And then, slowly, agonizingly, he rootles up again on the near side, horribly like a gigantic, footless beast in agony, entrapped, nuzzling and nosing his way up, and up, and up, until he staggers, half-erect, against the brink: and so, higher and yet higher, and yet higher, till at last once more the centre of gravity is

passed, and with a shattering crash, Behemoth falls forward on his belly again, and, after a few wild rockings forward and back, blandly proceeds toward his next trial.

This, let us take it, is a big square pile of built-up earth, walled in and breasted up with wood-baulks, till it is the size of a cottage, but many times stronger, being quite solid. Were it a cottage, in fact, it would crumble at the first moment of Behemoth's pressure: as it is, the baulks and solid bulk withstand him, as his snout ascends its sides, up, and up, until his mass seems to stand straight, erect in air, and he threatens apparently to fall backwards at any moment. But at the crucial instant, just as this appears inevitable, victory is gained, and Behemoth smashes down square upon the top, and subsides there, rocking. After a moment of sitting poised, however, he crawls forward again — out over the farther edge of the pile, until it is an anguish to see how far he hangs over, yet does not fall. Forward, forward he still proceeds, though, and with a crash like an earthquake takes a header once more to earth. But the rest of him is still to follow: onward gropes his snout, and onward, till with a far worse crash than the last his whole bulk falls square to earth again, with wilder, more reverberating rockings than ever. I tell you, it really is a fearsome sight: and what the Chinese must think of it all, one simply cannot conceive. And even this is only Behemoth at peace: imagine Behemoth enraged, with tusks of red fire projecting on either flank, drunkenly wallowing across the shell-shattered earth in his implacable advance, and cuddling cottages and shelters into crumbles with the dreadful, smooth rootlings of his snout; and you may begin to form a faint

notion of what fear fell upon the Amalekites when first they saw this new product of evolution.

I hope it does not appear too plain that I have enjoyed making that description — because I have! — And now, very many miles of shallow, flattening country lie between the Tank Park, and even the remotest, backward fringes of the war-zone.

9. THE RACES MUSTER

Gradually, however, the rural emptiness of the scene gives way to the roar and traffic of the incalculable population that soon occupies the entire landscape; more and more crowded grow the roads, with chains of lorries so endless as to leave my previous impression faint and faded. Lorries, lorries everywhere: the numbers of them endless upon the road itself, with whole ranks of others having lunch or a siesta along the gutters, or marshalled in dense formation down the fields. And the whole country, as I say, a camp. And all the nations of the earth, it seems, are gathered together here to put an end to the Dark Ages.

I do not mean merely the European Allies. I mean the strange assemblage of races from overseas. It is enough to make one feel quite romantic. Down the green lanes of Picardy come riding beautiful Sikhs, turbaned, dark, and proud; China has already got to work on her beloved agriculture, dotting the fields with blue-clad figures; handsome, befezzed Egyptians are digging in the waysides; and every shade and shape of little Indian blackamoor races in sackcloth grin and gibber cheerfully from the meadows. Yet all this Babel of races is but the inmost edge of the

vast population that now stretches away unbroken, to the devastated areas, and the fighting-line. We are nowhere near, as yet, to even the beginning of the war-zone, yet already I am got hold of by the impression of a whole people at work. The extraordinarily grandiose businesslikeness of the scene is something crushing; I get haunted and worried by the feeling that I have got something on the tip of my mind's tongue, on the fringe of my sight, that I have not yet seen or come to grips with. However, one can only follow out one's feelings as they come, and trust to luck.

10. THE PROPULSION OF A PEOPLE

Anyway, how can one give even the smallest notion of what is involved in the mere everyday organization of any army such as this? I could endlessly pile you up lists of camps and occupations and departments, of course, which would fill up long pages — but they would not give you any more idea of what one sees and feels out here than I myself had before I started. Everything arranged, everything catered for, everything ordered — a machine of a vastness and a complication quite inconceivable to people at home, kept running with a perpetual clockwork smoothness through every one of its almost innumerable cogs and wheels from the largest to the smallest. This is what an army of occupation is nowadays. It is not so much an army as a whole transplanted populace settled down to orderly work.

I see the war, now, as the forward sweep of an empire with a fringe of fire for its advancing rim. The fringe of fire depends upon the organized provinces behind it, and, although the forward movement of that fiery fringe is the

only *raison d'être* of the organized provinces behind, yet one sees from here, in a way, how the really important point of war is not so much the actual fighting front as the infinite weight of organization at the back. Because it is on the unvaryingness and exactitude of this that the steady advance of the front depends. In fact, the fringe of fire advances by virtue of pressure from the mass at its back, and on the fluctuations of that pressure it halts or proceeds. The whole thing is like a world in a fever, breaking into actual flame along its edge.

II. DESOLATION DAWNS

Out beyond Arras begins a no-man's-land of wreckage and ruins and weeds and indistinguishable mounds. Everything has been shattered to pieces, and you could hardly tell an *estaminet* from a church. The hulls and husks and shells of houses crouch knee-deep in this new ugly greenery of unclean weeds, and there is a deathly silence over the whole landscape, except when our guns go off, out of some lurking-place that no one would dream of somewhere in a hollow. Then, as you go farther, the country grows still deader and flatter and wilder, in a sinister vast oppressiveness, until one has a feeling of arriving upon the uttermost rim of the world. The traffic is raw and new, on raw, new, or remade roads, patched up from the ravages of shell-fire, and still all bumps and jumps. Every house is a mere pile of spillikins, or one wall is still standing like a cliff, and the rest of the building is a brick-slide at its feet. Railings and shutters and verandahs and summer-houses lie about half-buried in the wreck, convulsed and twisted and torn and abominably ugly. Phloxes and sunflowers still

flare out here and there from the hillocks of dock and nettle which are all that is left of the gardens. The whole thing is so ugly that one can hardly bear it: just hatefully ugly, a complete squalor of tragedy. Hitherto I had been feeling sentimental over each house that had a shell-hole in it: and everybody laughed at me. Now I know why. Real devastation does not begin until there is not enough left of the houses to have a hole. So much for the beauties and glories of war.

12. EVACUATION

For all these villages were quite legitimately and inevitably killed, either by our own fire or that of the Boche. It had to happen so, and their death is merely an incident. As for their owners and inhabitants, you may well ask where they are. Scattered to the four ill winds that blow nobody good. They are jetsam on the charity of France or England, or carried off as slaves into Germany by the Boches. Perhaps this is the one solitary point in which modern war, so coldly, mechanically bestial, compares favourably with the more personal and human furies of our forebears. In those days, when you shelled or sacked a city, all its inhabitants who had not gone away were included pell-mell in the destruction. Nowadays when a town seems likely to become a shelling-point, the inhabitants either bolt betimes, or are evacuated by one or other of the combatants, so that it is only their homes and properties that get destroyed.

Only! Lightly, and with a humane complacency, one speaks of such an alleviation; Uncle Simon, sadly rejoicing over even so trifling an advance in civilization, would

rejoice to a very different tune, assuredly, if that "only" applied to him and Simonstone! I wonder if the alleviation is so very great, after all, or whether it might not be happier to die quickly, under the ruins of the house and home one has made and cared for, than to be driven out shivering across the world like a leaf on an autumn gale, hopeless, homeless, penniless, without any prospect of ever finding pence or home again?

You cannot have omelettes, of course, without breaking eggs: and in this vast omelette we are cooking, how many hundreds upon thousands of shattered people and homes and houses are the broken eggs! These little villages, then, are only quite small baskets that have contributed their infinitesimal quota to the omelette: if you want to see a *panier* on the true market scale, which has given every egg it had, the place to go to is Arras.

13. ARRAS

Arras is a big town, or was. And now you can fairly say that there is not one house left intact in it, from end to end. It is full of a new life now, of course, of soldiers and officials and so on, yet the impression it gives is of a corpse. It is a quite dead city, murdered and silent. You go along the gloomy streets, up and down, and there is traffic going on and cheery-looking fellows, and notices of cinemas chalked up on the shuttered shops. But over the whole scene there broods a hush, as if you were in the house with a dead body. The streets are dark and quiet as you go through, and every building in them has got its roof blown in or its frontage blown out. They have a forlorn, abandoned, empty-eyed look, and their insides are shamelessly

laid bare. A curtain dismally flaps from a servant's attic, and oleographs still hang askew on the walls, and there are flower-pots poised on an upstairs sill, from which window and frame and everything else are gone. It is like passing down between interminable nightmare rows of doll's houses, with their fronts rudely smashed away instead of properly opened.

It is worse than that, somehow. It is a violation of something higher than decency. In the wrecked villages the destruction is so complete that you do not realize this so much. There is so little of them left that you cannot get the feeling of a real human home. They are simply ruins. But these streets are like lines of corpses, hardly cold, but perfectly dead. They are curiously horrible. I suppose one's mind by now is more or less accustomed to massacres of human beings. But the massacre of thousands upon thousands of actual homes has quite a different effect. Unconsciously I think one builds the foundations of one's life much more on homes and houses than on people. People are the furniture of one's rooms, and very essential; but the floors and walls are the indispensable realities. So that the murder of houses in the bulk is especially shocking; it is a breaking up of one's faith, — as it were a blasphemy.

You get that feeling all along the glum streets of Arras, and sometimes, through a dank, ruined back yard, you go in and find miserable little rooms still full of the loot and mess that the inhabitants themselves made when they were in process of clearing out. They are *écœurant* (there is no other word for it), these rooms, with their litter of old rags, boots, boneless umbrellas, broken tea-pots, kettles,

and odds and ends of every sort, lying tumbled pell-mell in a dense chaos over the floor — all the squalid paraphernalia of existence that it was not worth while to carry away.

Their utter lack of dignity does arrive somehow at real tragedy. You smell death, and these are discarded *nippes* of the thing dead.

And then you go out into the clean air again, and in the middle of the town you find a public garden, gay and brilliant with willows and flowering shrubs, lawns and pools and rock-works — with crowds of hearty young soldiers taking tea in a huge wooden pavilion, and whole mountain-ranges of empty bottles behind it to indicate cheerfulness yet more unmistakably. And we need it, in a place like this.

Only one of the original inhabitants of Arras is left. This is a little old lady, who has persistently lived through all the shelling, in her house just opposite the Cathedral. She pokes a twinkling face out of the window, and delights to tell her tale. At least, though she has lost almost everything she had, she still has a sound roof to her head. As for the Cathedral, this alone owes a real debt to the war. It was formerly a huge and hideous white building, of the date and size of Brompton Oratory, in the same soulless style of Victorian Palladian, with the added disadvantage of being set on such an eminence in the centre of the town as to dominate all the country far and near with its extravagant ugliness. But now the disadvantage has become a crowning mercy. Arras Cathedral has been absolutely shattered, and to-day, on its high point, its mere size has given it the enormous dignity of a broken Roman palace. On every side the ruin slides away in great screes of débris

to the streets below, and above, extraordinarily magnificent, go towering those gigantic naked columns, and vast high flights of ruined arches without a roof. Inside you find a mountainous chaos of ruin like any torrent-bed in some deep gorge of the limestone Alps, with moss and a few sickly poppies for the flora. And the only inhabitants of the Cathedral now are the uncanny little homeless cats that slink among the stone-tumbles furtively, like grey shadows in a hurry, and repel all human overtures with their peaked green glare. And through the overshadowed, hollow-feeling silence, you hear the guns in the distance.

There are ruins of all the ages in Arras. I do not know which are the worst. Is it mere snobbishness in us that sentimentalizes especially over the destruction of some historic palace or church? Or do you agree with me that they really do have a quasi-mystic value quite beyond the mere mass of their stones and mortar, and the artistic merit of their carvings. Of course, there is any amount of conventional rubbish talked, and there are millions of people who go enthusiastically Baedekering about, who would not really lose a crumb of lunch or a wink of sleep if Chartres and Venice and Ravenna and Agia Sophia were all whisked up together in the omelette I spoke of. But I do think, in real people, there is a solid basis for what they feel about the sanctity of old things; it is not merely the surface venerableness that grows with time, and develops like moss on aged sovereigns such as Queen Victoria, or Franz Josef, or the Grand Dowager, from the mere fact of having been there so long that they have become a national habit.

It is, really, that a beautiful old building is itself an accumulated incarnation of the ages. It accumulates a

soul of its own, out of all the souls that have played a part in its creation and preservation. So that it is something very much more than itself; and with its death there vanishes a conspicuous manifestation of something immortal. And that is the real tragedy about the destruction of the Grande Place and the Town Hall and the Town Library of Arras. There is no more sanctity attaching to the houses of the Grande Place *per se* than to any other houses of men: but they were a living tradition. And now there is not one of them left whole, neither in the Grande nor the Petite Place: and the cobbled expanses are all grass-grown, and the arcades are buried under piles of frontage fallen away from the beautiful old moulded Spanish gables of Charles the Fifth's time. As for the tower of the Town Library, now it is more like a rain-crumbled block of chalk than anything else. Down below there is one little projecting angle, just to tell you how lovely the whole must once have been. But so it had to be: lamentation for lost beauty can go too far. We must not confuse cause with result. Visible beauty itself is only the incarnate result of a nation's healthy spirit. And we are fighting now for the precise purpose of restoring such a healthy spirit to the world as shall give a sound soil from which beauty may again spring. The loveliest tulips may get broken, in one's efforts to cleanse and hoe the bed for new ones, and clear away strangling weeds.

The railway station is just as complete a destruction, and even more glaring and grotesque. It was a typical huge red-brick palace once, with a clock-tower and glass roofs, and waiting-halls and galleries. And now there is not a pane of glass remaining, and all the iron-work is torn

into convulsions, and the clock-tower is a skeleton, and the building has been battered to death with shell-bursts. It is barred up now, dark, silent, and utterly dead. And in the railway lines the grass is thick like hay, and in the front of the station there is the conventional semicircular *place*, big and open, with drink-shops and a statue. Everything is peppered and riddled and blasted with shells or rifle bullets; all the portages are blank with iron shutters, and each is a sieve of bullet-holes. The statue is gone, and the tall, ugly street-lamps are twisted as if Sherlock Holmes had been tying them into knots, and there are big tumbles and mounds of bricks and shingle, as if some one had started building a series of moraines.

And on these there is actually the purple Buddleia, seeded itself and gone wild, exactly as I last saw it on the shingles of Tibet. The sight of it gave me a sudden sharp shock — of wonder about the people who originally bought the parent plant as a new rare treasure, and tenderly cherished it in some chosen corner of their garden here. What has become of them now, and what has become of their garden? Not that it matters, or can make any difference to this scene of sordid modern ugliness in ruin. Perhaps it is almost worse than the dead old buildings. In a way those lie quiet with folded hands, but these new buildings are full-blooded and violent-looking in their death. The railway station has even a certain sinister and sombre magnificence, and it seems somehow rather out of place that a building so ugly, so modern, so merely utilitarian, should thus have been promoted by martyrdom to a sort of beauty.

And all this is war as legitimately waged. If nobody

had done any worse than this, then there might be peace to-morrow, — a real peace, I mean, of mutual handshaking, not a mere patched-up peace of protocols. And I wonder, now, what the illegitimate Boche methods of war can have to show me, by way of further wretchedness! And yet, for some mysterious reason, one is not ever quite wretched.

Yours

R. F.

III. THE VISION DAWNS

Château de Noère

I. I DISCOVER ENGLAND

There has been no chance of a letter all these days. Things are much too big for me out here, and I develop a kind of cerebro-cardiac congestion that is really a positive physical pain. All this time that I have been babbling to you about ruins and tanks, of course, you will have felt that I have been suffering in labour of a vision behind these veils, that always seemed coming to the birth, yet never could. It is rather horrible to be perpetually haunted by something too large for conception — just, just beyond one's grasp all the time. All the time it is there — and yet it never is. But now I have caught it. And it was a very simple thing, after all. What I have found is England — Great Britain — the Anglo-Saxon races — whatever you like to call it — anyhow, US.

To find the real England you have to come to France: and there is something almost frightening and painful about the sudden intensity of the blaze in which it bursts upon you out here. England, at home, has had a difficult, unhappy atmosphere to judge in this past year. I have not been easy in it: perhaps I misunderstood. It all seemed restless and feverish, passing greedily from the gush of war correspondents to Ephesia Banners posturing perpetually for some new "Charity" or other, in some new form of frill. Of course, this mainly means that I was affected, myself, by the general strain: but still it was not a steady-

ing environment. *Ipso facto*, one heard nothing of the many millions of decent folk who merely sit quiet and do things, and bear things — and *are* England. The atmosphere in which one lived was created by the whirl of the others. So that I grew tired and disheartened at times — could not see the big things for the small ones. And now I come out here and find — This!

A new England, an England undreamt-of at home, an England of a shattering grandeur beyond my utmost conception — of a grandeur that even defies advertisement and transcends rhetoric. What does all this amount to? I will try to tell you. A whole huge people, methodically at work on a job it hates. That is what England is in France, and there is a gallant grimness, a tooth-set business-likeness out here, that is indescribably reassuring and exalting, and it is like nothing I expected. As you know, I came here honestly, to see what I could see, not to find what I wanted. And, as it turns out, what I have seen is something infinitely far beyond the very utmost stretch of anything I could ever have hoped and wanted in my most radiant aspirations. Not a ghost of an inkling had I had of the fighting forces, and their mood.

2. THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF TALK

I do not quite see how I could, though. From individuals you only get each man's own personal, piecemeal bit of observation and impression; and they are so many and so divergent that they leave you in a blur, and you cannot put them together into a whole. Then, *communiqués*, necessarily, are curt and cold, and correspondents, — also, I suppose, necessarily, — are so lusciously sentimental, or

so luxuriantly pictorial, as to end by leaving one with no clear picture at all of what the fighting man really is. The "homely touch" which our press has caught from America, and is now teaching its patients to require, is really a cold-blooded and unholy externalization of the war, so that readers comfortable in their armchairs may take a spectacular pleasure in the prowess of Sergeant This or Captain That, with no more personal feeling of concern than if they were remote characters in history, like Hannibal, or Hector.

It is even worse than that. The press has turned the war into a colossal gladiatorial show, at which its readers vicariously assist, and get their sympathies and perceptions thoroughly blunted and dulled in sensationalism, so that in the end the human man has been obliterated from one's consciousness — drowned under a monotonous hose-pipe of gush.

I wonder which they most hate, — these real people out here, — the cant of sloppy adulation, or that which turns them always to cheery grigs?

3. THE SONG OF ENGLAND

I sing the song of England. I cannot help it. The knowledge has come upon me as a crowning miracle, so wonderful a lily to have sprung from the hectic malarious soil of 1914, unwholesome with the weeds and darnels of parties and politics and pettifogging egoisms. I do not even see why one should not give rein to enthusiasm: rhetoric is merely the anguish of a penny whistle in labour to express the passions of a trombone. And how few of us are trombones! But if you were out here, you would appreciate the miracle of England as, I am perfectly certain,

you can never do at home, no matter how people may gush. Do you remember that Bishop Creighton talks somewhere about the unfortunate legacy of fighting great causes over trivial details (or words to that effect) "bequeathed to the Church of England." It is not a legacy, it is a quality: it is not Anglican, it is English. In other words, the ordinary Englishman has a quite uncanny power (it works both well and ill) of detecting a big issue behind some apparently small and irrelevant event. He is not in the least conscious of that power, and would snort if you told him he had it; but he goes bald-headed for the big issue all the time — whether it be a revolution in religious thought foreshadowed by a bishop's gilt boots, or the subversion of all European law and order by the tearing-up of a scrap of paper.

4. THE BLIND INSTINCT

It is even this curious secret and instinctive insight which has given the average Englishman, all down his history, a real political weight in its development; and to-day, as a result, makes "democracy," in his case, much less of a mockery and a catchword than elsewhere. And it was evidently this call that England has been answering during these last three years. It would be ridiculous to pretend that Belgium and the Belgians — still less Serbians and Roumanians and Montenegrins — have any particular hold upon the affections of the average Englishman: on the other hand, it would be easy to slop over indefinitely about the "poor little downtrodden nations" and England's picturesque attitude of chivalry. The real significance of the war lies in the fact that, behind Belgium,

Serbia, Montenegro, the average Englishman saw clearly one thing, far more important than all of them, and all of us, the thing that riveted his intention absolutely; he saw the "scrap of paper," not as a mere outrage of strong on weak, but as the very definite and deliberate denial of all the codes and conventions of honour laboriously compiled by Europe through centuries of civilization, with a view to continuing in that state, and at peace. When pledges may be broken on pleas of necessity, pledges cease to be of value any more. They are no longer current coin in the market, and civilization is bankrupt of all security except that of the sword.

I think it is Uncle Angus who is credited with the immortal comment that "One can buy honour too dearly." The remark itself baffles comment, quite apart from the obvious fact that "honour" is not a mysterious entity, with a sacred significance of its own, but merely humanity's crystallized convention for the carrying-on of life, without which all society would inevitably and automatically crumble into chaos. And it was this that the Anglo-Saxon races have seized on with their usual unerring and yet quite formless instinct for the inexorable logic of things (on which the Englishman always bases his political arguments, though well he knows in reality that logical outcomes, in England, are as invariably avoided as foreseen), as the Englishman set to work taking up the White Man's burden, in a solemn and severe annoyance at having to do so, and doing so not so much for any immediate reason as in a great blind, dim sense of the whole orderly evolution of the world involved, and himself, among others, responsible for its preservation.

5. TWO ANTI-MILITARIST EMPIRES

I do not know if this is to make the intervention of England a bigger thing, or a smaller. To my own eyes, it looms as something almost superhuman in its resolution and its self-sacrifice. England stands, after China, as the one consistently anti-militarist nation of the world. Nations that base themselves proudly and consciously upon law do develop inevitably into contempt for the man who may prove to be the ultimate safeguard of law, just because, by the same illogical means, he may also prove its subverter. Therefore, whatever the feeling of the nation, the army had never, till quite lately, been necessarily associated with it: nor the nation with that of the army — it was an engine of the nation's governors, not of the nation's own emotions. ("Soldier," "soudard," "soldado," all express a contempt, a sense of alienness, of which there is no trace in "stratiôtes" and "miles.")

6. OUR FORMER ARMIES

And, as men become what they are considered, our former army grew into the likeness of what it was believed to be. Wellington frankly considered his men to be the scum of the earth: as scum he treated them, and scum they became. And, even in our own early days, Kipling's Tommy Atkins is but the echo of England's eternal attitude towards the man who goes out a-slaughtering when he might, perhaps, be running a comfortable grocer's shop instead. It is taken at once for granted, in fact, for the credit of human sense, that the man who makes so wretched a choice has no better choice before him: no grocer's shop

will have him — let the wastrel take the shilling, then. The view is as characteristically English as Chinese.

7. THE NEW ARMY

But a perfectly new army began to be born at about the time when Queen Victoria began to die — a thing entirely different from the old one alike in conception and in composition. The New Army is not a national possession like the Old: it is the nation itself, the nation itself deliberately enslaved to civilization. It is only by straining words unfairly that you can call this a conscript army. For England is conscript only to her own will, and by her own will, not, like the other nations that we call conscript, imprisoned in the orders of a government or an autocrat. Nor was the surrender made to enthusiasm, to a personality or a majority, but to England's own conscience alone.

A great deal of rubbish is talked nowadays, about this being a War of Democracies. (Poor abused word, respectively shibboleth and anathema to whole classes of worthy persons, who have not a notion what it really means, but are content to make it mean what they either admire or abhor.) But, setting all nonsensical political meanings and distinctions aside, there is a real truth underlying this catchword. For, for the first time (so far as I can see) in history, we are assisting at a great continental war which is substantially not a war of dynasties or interests, but of ideas. Or, rather, the interests are, of course, there, but it is the dominance of the ideas behind them that has alone made this war possible, and raised it to what it is, a crusade of peoples, as universal, and as profoundly felt, as any that mediæval pope set flowing towards the Sepulchre. Then,

also, no royal decree or papal bull could have produced such results, unless there had been a wave of popular idealism to back them, and now, without pope or king to play a part, the popular idealism has of itself taken charge of the situation. Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, are but material details of what is really, as I say, nothing more nor less than a new Crusade, inspired by a new wave of a religious spirit which, this time, has nothing to do with the evil thing which has borne that name in the past.

At least, so I cannot help seeing it. I take the policy of Bismarckism as axiomatic, and as axiomatic I take the reaction of the entire world's conscience against an egoism so colossal in conception and so abominable in execution. In Uncle Simon's theory, that dear, kind Germany would have done nobody any harm if only we had allowed her to overrun Belgium and trample down France, I take no stock whatever: in the first place, it is not true, and in the second, I am certain our sense of decency could not have borne it, and in the third I am equally certain that our interests could not. Had we stuck to the wisdom of Henry VII, we should not now be paying the posthumous bills of Queen Victoria, who transferred our interests from France to Prussia.

In any case, that side of the issue is but a comparatively small one; what is important is that, a vast and vastly evil force having got abroad in the world (largely through the world's own fault), the whole world has reacted against it in resistance at last, and England, in particular, has imposed upon herself, in Apostolic phrase, an odious yoke, to the end that she and all the rest of the nations may henceforth be free.

And the determination of our army to win through is the measure of its annoyance at having to do so. The Toms and Dicks and Harries who compose it, are not by any means pleased at having to leave their careers and break their lives, in order to do policeman against the mad dog of Germany. The miracle of the New Army is that it is a make-believe. There is no man in it who is not primarily something quite different from a soldier; each man's sole ambition is to get back to his own life and his own work as soon as the completion of his present job allows him.

8. THE GREAT RENUNCIATION

And the supreme wonder is that this newborn make-believe, this yesterday's agglomeration of tinkers, tailors, and candlestick-makers, is steadily giving the lie to all conscriptionist theories, by proving itself at every point superior to that old-established perfected conscriptionary machine of Germany, to which our militarists have so long been pointing as the model. It is not conscription that has done this: it is the will to be conscripted, it is the idea behind. I find, in fact, in the achievements and existence of the New Army, not the triumph of militarism in England, but the hardest blow that militarism has ever had. Indeed, the triumph of real pacifism. For this army is an *ad hoc* army, doggedly and dourly devoted to the odiousness of war, for the sole sake of peace. It is, if you like to call it so, a democratic machine, not a military one.

9. THE WAR AGAINST WAR

Real new armies, created by a real new spirit, have a tiresome habit (as Cromwell found) of not continuing

to develop placidly along the lines laid down by authority, but, in proportion as their inspiring spirit is genuine, advancing insubordinately upon lines on their own. And this new army of ours is not out for further wars — or the interests of a party or a dynasty. It is only out for true peace and the destruction of war. I do not say that this war is to be the last, or that the evil karma of mankind will be worked out in the next generation, or even the twentieth or two-hundredth after that. Nevertheless, the advance continues: as cannibalism has gone, as duelling has gone (both, no doubt, very necessary institutions in their day), so I do certainly believe that war will also one day take its place beside these in the museum of history, as an awkward, ugly invention that at one time served the necessities of that time, but was ultimately shelved as a grotesque anomaly in the altered conditions of mankind.

In old days war was the pleasure of the rulers: nowadays it is the detestation of everybody — except of the Prussian who willed it. Of course, there are at present, and no doubt will continue to be for many generations yet, a number of fire-eating war-mongers and dashing blades who will always bounce about the delights of battle and the salubrious qualities of slaughter. But these, when genuine, are atavisms, and must gradually become as extinct as dodoes, as the world advances in sense and experience of actualities. Already they have very largely been killed off, or silenced by satiety: and the New Army, free and unaccustomed, torn, as I say, from every sort of different occupation, has seen and felt a very great deal too much of the reality of war to be under any illusion as to its loveliness or enjoyability. Unredeemed horror is the whole thing, a

horror that breaks up the soul of man into a gibbering wreckage. Black and crimson, the knowledge has been written deep into the inmost heart of the New Army. And that is why the New Army is really pacifist in the genuine sense of the word; that is why it will never be the dupe of either "pacifists" or junkers at home, wailing for a premature or inconclusive peace, to save their caste or their pocket.

I tell you, it is something quite staggering and amazing, the sense of determination out here, that carries one up in a sort of cyclone of enthusiasm, entirely unguessed in England.

10. MISLEADING GLOOMS

In England we have no notion of the New Army; we take its grumblings and its glooms as symptoms of depression: whereas they are really but the guarantee of its intense concentration on the achievement of its work. *Of course*, no man enjoys his job, of course, no man wants to come back to it, to be rat-ridden, lousy, soaked, and bombed incessantly, to undergo first of all the enormously hard humdrum tiresomeness of training and preparation and waiting, and then the yet more unpleasing combination of tedium and terror as you sit in a trench being shelled without the least possibility of taking any effective steps about it: and finally, the desperation of the Red Rush, — not a pleasant thing to share or to think of afterwards, — a thing dehumanizing, wholly disgusting and disconcerting to the average Englishman, trained for centuries past in the decencies of law, order, and self-control. The whole thing is altogether loathsome in every detail.

And the more and the louder our men proclaim their intimate appreciation of the fact, the more imperturbable you may judge their purpose to put the work through. It is *our* way: it is a new way, to match new circumstances, and, of course, it is open to the risk of misleading those who have not understood that our English obstinacy in a job may be gauged by our proclaimed detestation of it. Once this is grasped, the whole thing falls into line, and you understand the New Army and its victorious certainty, the tremendous sombre exaltation, reluctant, leaden, and unalterable, that underlies its weariness and grumbling.

II. THE EMANATION

And if you ask me how I come to *know* all these high and wonderful things — well, feeling is a far surer guide than knowledge. No one who has ever stood in front of an audience, on stage or platform, will deny for a moment that a crowd is infinitely more than the sum of its component individuals and radiates its own emotion in an impalpable atmosphere. And it is precisely on his power of seizing this impression and responding to it that every speaker or writer or actor has to base all his chances of success, his very existence as an artist. And if this is true of a little crowd in a theatre or a town hall, an army of more than two million people, energizing in unrelenting storm and stress, is bound to diffuse its emotions in waves incomparably vaster — to such a point, indeed, that the sensitized plate of one's mind receives those waves with an almost agonizing vividness of impression.

I tell you, it has been to me an overpowering revelation, this coming within radius of a combined wave of effort,

weariness, and high-hearted, stolid purpose such as the world has never seen before, and certainly never as the self-engendered enthusiasm of a whole people. Behind all the dust and din, the mud, the blood, the turmoil, dreariness, and horror, there looms upon you uneasily, as I have tried to make you feel, for days and days the haunting presence of something infinitely grand; and when at last, out of the very shadow of death, the thing takes shape, it bursts upon you in a splendour that dwarfs yourself and every one else into nothingness.

And yet there is nothing to show for all I say: you can refuse it or deny it. I can only tell you that I feel it so, I feel it vibrating in every fibre of me day and night until I cannot sleep for the marvellous burden of greatness. I feel crowded up all the time to breaking point with the urgency and hopelessness of giving it vent in expression. No, I do not think you need ever again suffer from the small recurring glooms of London: I know *I* never shall. Out here one is cured forever of such megrims — or I hope so. “*Quien sabe?*” said Queen Mary.

Yours

R. F.

IV. THE ABOMINATION

Château de Noère

I. THE VISION HOLDS

I am glad I wrote to you the other day. Real things are not easy to say, but it is a great relief when they have been said. Keeping steady at home among the storms of opinion is the hardest thing the war has given us to do. And, to keep warm in any optimism that shall not be merely foolish, I have had to make it a real religious faith, something I grapple violently round me, no matter what pessimists or pacifists or politicians or papers may say. But, of course, it is not always easy. And that is why being here is so huge a help. For now the vision has become a reality — a reality absolute and wonderful: the hope has become a certainty, and there is no possibility of being worried or made unhappy any more. It is not just a small, personal matter; it is a real, permanent confirmation, a kind of ecstasy — a vanishing of faith into sight. And the enthusiasm stays burning: there is no decline or reaction.

The whole atmosphere is full of a curious contagious radiance. There may be every hardship and dullness and discomfort about the makeshift life that these people are leading, but all the same there comes out of them a hot exhalation of health and good spirits. I do not mean any silly, comic breeziness, but that sort of hard, seasoned good-humour that comes to hale, hearty men, well-set to their job. The Australians look more dour, but they are of quite

another breed. In the shape of their skulls, and thin, hatchet type of face, you see at once a wholly different atmosphere and background. They have not got that long inheritance of kindly surroundings and training in the amenities of life which has certainly given our men a liveableness without which I do not see how they could have risen to the delicacies and difficulties of their situation out here.

2. FRANCE AND ENGLAND

For, as one threads all these lanes and streets one cannot but realize that England has settled upon France like a cuckoo. Nothing but real elasticity on both sides could have eased off the strain of such a three years' occupation. France is in the position of some one who, for a common end, has invited an old acquaintance — not by any means an intimate friend — to come and share the house. And, after three years, there the acquaintance still is. And France and England, anyhow, have never been countries that intimately understood or appreciated each other. No one is going to pretend that the average Englishman is a being of the most fine and subtle social tact: and nobody else is going to pretend that the average Frenchman has any emotional taste for taking strangers into his life and home. The diffident, awkward, or effusive pleasantness of the English, and the brisk, cast-iron cordiality of the French are manifestations of two sets of qualities diametrically opposed: the former, the suggestion of a real wish to make friends; the latter, the mask of a self-defensive reserve.

And, if France has thus happily accepted this perennial

locust-occupation of her land, a very great deal of the credit must be ascribed, not only to her own sense of exigency and our own admirable financial arrangements and control of our men, but to the very men themselves.

3. THE NEW SOLDIER

The new English Tommy is not a soldier at all, but a civilian: khaki is his temporary mufti. He is really a gardener, a cab-driver, a miner, a man with a place of his own in the world, and a home of his own. And, therefore, he is not in the least like the old professional soldier, to whom his home was but a memory, and a private house a temporary incident. Instead of being stiff and a stranger, he passes easily from one domesticity to another and becomes immediately a part of his new French home: he cuts wood, he fetches water, he minds the kettle, he keeps the cat amused.

And above all, he is not difficult, he does not mind being cheated — a point which appeals with peculiar pungency to the French peasant or bourgeois. "Don' let's 'ave no fuss, ses a man, a-smilin' comfrerble." This is the chief secret. The average Englishman, of all classes, is essentially a "comfrerble" person. He is quite willing to buy quiet at an extra rate, and does not in the least mind paying three times the proper value of an egg: because, in the first place, he probably does not know what the proper value of an egg is, and in the second, he does not care. All of which is immensely endearing to the thrifty heart of France.

4. BOCHE PRISONERS

Of course, you do get people coming back from Paris all agog to say how sick the French are of the English, and how the English hate the French, and have no good word to say for any of their Allies, but only for the Boche. The one chance is not to listen. In this war you must never listen to private opinions. We have got to keep our heads held high, and our gaze kept resolutely fixed on distances away out beyond all this dreadfulness. London and Paris, too, are froth-curds cast aside from the spate of the war, up in backwaters far from the main stream of realities: not there need you expect to find the pure waters of truth.

As for what we feel about the Boche, there is very little question out here, for here he is, pretending to be busy at road-mending in a comfortable security, very many miles behind even the beginnings of the actual war-zone, and in a most comfortable leisure, under the guardianship of English soldiers. At present I cannot clarify my impressions of these Boche prisoners: no doubt I shall see them often enough again. I came upon them quite suddenly, and I think I can fairly say that I did not begin with a predetermined antagonism to them—as individuals.

These people by the roadsides, too, are of quite humble caste—not the responsible authors of our agony, but merely the inconscient grist in the machine. Some of them are strong, well-set-up, decent-looking young fellows, but there is only rarely a face that is really comfortable and pleasant. The large majority, even to one's first glance, are low, *chétif*, weaselly types, looking uglier yet

beneath their useless little peakless round caps, as unprofitable as any Chinese skull-cap for purposes of shade or shelter. And the look in their eyes is like a bad smell. It lowers and slinks, it is furtively and coldly malignant. This is not a journalistic flourish of imagination, because they were Boches: it is what I met as I passed them. Do you remember George Fox's last meeting with the Protector? — "And a waft of death went forth against him." As you meet these Boches, it is a waft of something dank and odious that comes forth against you.

I hope I am not vindictive against them, but I confess it vexes my spirit to see them so leisurely employed on what only by courtesy could be called work: seven featherweight taps on a stone, and then a rest to look at it, until, at the end of the day, home go all the prisoners comfortably in a lorry to their cage, and our own soldiers remain to do the real work. I do grudge them that lorry, and but for the saving of time would very gladly see them trudging it on their sturdy, well-fed legs. On the other hand, I am also told that they do in reality work better than they seem to, and anyhow, we need not fear that, with no matter how much generosity treated, the Boche is going to be taken to the heart of either England or France.

"*Tiens, les Boches!*" said a little glove-selling lady in a shop, as by there rumbled a lorryful. And in her eyes, as she watched them, was a strange look, a remote aversion tinged with curiosity, as when one comes by chance on something odd and noxious in nature. But you must remember that these impressions are merely personal: of course, I cannot quite tell how far they may be influenced by knowledge of what the Boche really is. Uncle Angus

and Uncle Simon, for instance, would certainly have made a point of seeing these Boche prisoners as higher and more civilized types than our own people. However, their bias is as patent as mine: and whereas mine is based on Boche facts and deeds, theirs is based on Boche fictions, and a predetermination that everything British is more or less bad, and everything Boche replete with good.

5. ALBERT

And now we are advancing over the long, rolling sweeps of a country growing opener and barer at every mile, towards a complete moorland-looking bareness that fills all the horizon, till, out of an intervening vale, there appears in the distance the Tower of the Falling Virgin. Albert was once a rich and populous red-brick town; not so very large in proportion to its wealth, but of a piety that does not always go with riches. For the wealth of Albert flowered recently in a red-brick church almost as huge as it was hideous. Gorgeous, blatant, abominable in its glittering, extravagant vulgarity, it ruled the shallow vale in which the town clusters beneath it, and raised its purse-proud tower far aloft in a heaven-provoking arrogance. Everywhere the most expensive adornments disfigured it: it bulged with side-shows and galleries and turrets and turricules and irrelevant protuberances of all sorts; its tower sprouted offsets like bulbils on the stem of *Lilium tigrinum*; and wherever mosaic could be applied, there were flashing, gaudy surfaces of gold, within and without, encrusted with pious scenes and emblems in the worst style of modern Catholic art. And now it is merely a tawdry, hulking wreck, with no grandeur but that of mere

shattered size. From the skeletonized dome at the top of the tower that everlasting Virgin swoops forward and outward over the town, indefatigably appealing to obvious sentiment.

Albert, broken and battered as it is, is still alive in places. Beside the soldiers that come and go, and direct the traffic at every corner, and contribute individually to the clockwork perfection of the whole huge machine, there are also little shops reopened, where you may buy souvenirs — a rose or a pansy worked in violent wool-work on a card, kisses and tender mottoes, and robins on holly twigs, and everything likely to tempt the soldier into buying them for his dear ones or his fair ones far away. But Albert is a broken place, and these gaudy little emporia, full of cards and oddments, seem strange to come on, here and there in a street of frontages either silent and shuttered or broken down with shell. And Albert stands on the last verge of human habitation. Now we step off into the abomination of desolation.

6. THE SOMME

For, while away down on the right the kindly land of France, open and cultivated, ranges away to Amiens, in front and all along to the left there now lies before you only the anguish of the Somme and Ancre battlefields. For a little while longer, indeed, one bowls easily out over placid, undulating country, and then — one comes suddenly upon the undulating, placid desolations that were exactly the same a few years since. The first sight of the devastated area is a stunning shock. I have n't even begun to grasp it yet. Those who came before did not see it like

this, though, nor will those who come after. It is like a huge, empty stage, cleared from its last tragedy, on which the mounting of the next play has not yet begun. I am between the dramas. Along the voluminous velvety road one rolls under plummy avenues of trees. And then the road becomes less velvety, and the avenues by degrees less plummy, till suddenly they are only stark skeletons, gap-toothed and shell-shattered in their rows; and out you get upon the roadside, to look across a shallow vale towards a shallow rise on the far side.

Oh, those little shallow hills and rises! how sinister one gets to feel them, from the very first! Gentle and insignificant as they are, not high-seated Rome herself has cost her conquerors so heavy a toll. For now you are looking out over all the wide, low sweep of our first Somme advance, upwards to Fricourt. Not so, indeed, did those see it who came before. For now it is all a surfy sea of weed, of a uniform, rank, leaden green as far as you can see, with the vivid brown of rusty iron roof-arks peppered across the distance. But then, in the days of its activity, the whole scene was a naked hell of bare earth and flint and spattered mud, with the successive agonies of our advances. Of these the man who was with me told me the tale, in soft, slow tones: I sat and listened, and felt appalled by the impotent imbecility of the questions I put, to a man who had been through the whole tempest. The story sounded almost incredible across the unruffled, vacant peacefulness of that huge landscape. Did one ever quite realize what the thing was, or involved? I know *I* read papers and things and listen to amateur strategy, and generally felt that I knew everything about everything. "Everything" looks a little

different when one comes into actual sight of even so tiny a fragment of it as this, the scene of the first successful British advance.

7. THE PIERCING DETAIL

But it was not about that I thought, as I sat and listened, and reconstructed the actual detail of the fighting and the fighting life. If only one can ever sort out the skein of one's mental tangles about all this! At present I am dazed and stupid with the sheer revelation. I had seen war, I suppose, in the making already. But it was not, somehow, so actual as this, where war has left only the trail of its placid, dreadful has-been. Out towards Ypres there had been no fury, no push, nothing of what one's press-fed mind calls "fighting": there was desultory firing, and vast activities went on over a scene so incalculably vast itself that the activity has seemed a mere incident. I could not get to grips with it then. Or perhaps it is that my brain has been growing since? Anyhow, I get a feeling of going on waking and waking and waking, as gradually there dawns the full meaning of this obscure dull green shallow, knee-deep in weeds.

The actual numbers of the dead who bought the Fricourt rise, indeed, say nothing to me as yet: three hundred and sixty thousand is an empty figure; three hundred and sixty thousand you's and I's, — it is merely unthinkable, grotesque. It's like being told by Canon Bunker that "all the negroes in the world, if placed end to end, would reach three times round the globe, Christian friends, and half-way to the North Pole." One says, "Oh," or some other remark indicative of polite nonabsorption; and passes on.

What grips me most here, somehow, is not the numbers of the dead, or their achievement, but — so oddly and violently — the hitherto unrealized fact that, before they became dead, they were really quite live men, living an existence of material routine as close as they could possibly get it to their ordinary one.

8. THE SLACK IMAGINATION

I do not believe I am peculiarly unimaginative in never having properly grasped these obvious facts. Perhaps it is just the obvious that one's imagination least easily does grasp — because it feels it need not take the trouble. Imagination is really an acrobat *saltimbanque*: it can jump high fences, but it cannot trudge a highroad — or rather, it will not. It ought to: we ought to be always training our imagination to watch everything that goes on, even in the ordinary humdrum of life. Then we might really begin to understand. As it is, we are so lazy that we cannot be troubled to notice the ordinary and everyday; we reserve our perception for only the salient sensational points — men dying violently, not men living ordinarily, cursing over their fitful washing in a cold morning before an attack, or rolled up in a blanket afterwards, and snoring. In fact, our imagination is a snob, and considers that the only objects worthy of it are the exceptional ones. It reminds me of my father once saying that the Kipling soldier-songs were “vulgar,” because they were about “common” people; which leads straight back to the classic theory that only kings and queens are fit matter for literature, and that even a *mouchoir* must become a *bandeau* to make it respectable.

9. ACTUALITIES

Anyhow, the homely actualities of war come upon me as a start at which my brain well knows it has no right to startle, yet at which my imagination startles none the less. So odd: I do not know what I had supposed the thing was like: taken everything for granted, I expect, except the actual fighting. I am sure people do. I asked Tom one day at home what he thought the front was like. "Oh," he said, he imagined "there was a front line sort-of-thing, and that it was very much the same all the way along." No conception whatever that the front line is *only* the front line, with a gigantic pressure and complication of organized life behind: no apparent comprehension of the fact that even a fighting army has to be fed and washed and taken care of, to the tune of many miles deep of country converted into a solid camp of men at work supporting it.

And it is the sudden flashing upon my imagination that all these details of life, the routine of washing and cooking and feeding, are there, and go on as a matter of course, even on the edge of the bloodiest attacks, which really, I think, most gets me by the throat, on my first sight of the Somme fields. Of course, I do not mean that this will remain the dominant note in my mind: only that amid the chaos of emotions, this is the one that has emerged the earliest into clear light. Heaven knows, there is more to follow: there is a wonderful turmoil going on inside me all the time. All the time it hurts — and yet it somehow does not quite hurt unhappily. The soul has its growing pains, I suppose.

10. LIFE GOES ON

Out there, in that dull green dawn, there were once upon a time whole lines of dug-outs crowded with men eating their breakfasts, and their servants tumbling over each other with each man's shaving-water. It is such a simple little matter-of-fact business: but here its inevitableness suddenly becomes rather splendid. Die one will when die one must, but how doubly disconcerting to be caught by the King of Peacemakers unkempt and unshorn! Our soaps and our razors are to us the housellings, appointments, and annealments that Hamlet's old father so deplored having missed.

Yet there seems to one a ghastly homely heroism about the process here. All these people, knowing what is to happen on a tick of the watch, deafened to each other's cursings by the guns, methodically scraping their chins clean amid an unimaginable hubbub — simply in honour of the Death whom all but two or three of them will quite certainly and with foreknowledge meet that day, between the giving of the signal and that unspeakable cold march up the rise, with the fires and furies of hell before them and behind and in their midst. And then, at the end, battered and dazed, the few who are left alive settle down for the night somehow in a new, haphazard reconstruction of order, and wake again in the morning (if shells have let them) once more to repeat that symbolic scraping of their chins.

II. EMOTIONAL STAGGERS

I do not think I shall go on. The emotion of the thing takes hold of me so: and I do not yet quite know where emotion leaves off and emotionalism begins. But I hope in time I may grow strong enough to laugh at our characteristic dread of emotion. All *that* was the armour of weakness: as we get bigger the armour is less and less necessary, and less and less able to hold in the expansions of our pectoral muscles.

Anyhow, do not expect me to tell you this tale of mine without emotion. But I want always to be sure that what I am giving you is the real thing, not worked-up slop. So, as I am so tired and dazed by now as not to be quite certain of myself or my balance any longer, I shall leave off here.

Yours

R. F.

V. THE DARK

Château de Noère

I. DESOLATION GRIPS

Almost helpless in search of words to clothe my nakedness, I go on roaming, round and about, up and down, in the vastnesses of the Somme tragedy, through Maricourt, Fricourt, Combles, and many other names that now belong to history. I do not call them places; they are not places any more. There is hardly ever anything to tell where they have ever been: unless it is a slight unevenness in the uniform sweep of weed. In the folds and dips of the undulating desolation they lurk indecipherably (though Combles, indeed, is a charred, scattered skeleton of what many another little cosy Picardy town, such as Doullens, still is): you are told where they were, and what, and your tired heart opens and shuts like the mouth of a fish in a vain endeavour to realize that once there were living villages and hamlets here, where now there is absolutely nothing but dimples and dumps of greenery. What a way to have to recognize the place where one had lived! As for the house in which one had done it, no human power could recognize that; nor even the point at which it had stood. Cemeteries of crowded little crosses and lonely graves among the grass alone give a touch of life to the scene—if you can call it a touch of life. One can only suffer helplessly—in a feeble vagueness, as one drives along, overwhelmed with the general anguish of awaking.

2. EMOTIONALISM

Some people come out here elaborately predetermined to feel all the expected, proper, preconceived emotions. They wander about so deliberately feeling them as in the end not really to have had any genuine emotion of their own at all. I envy them: if you come out here empty-minded, you become filled almost at once with a wine too heady for the brain to receive. And it is all so obvious, too: a year ago I should have scorned the idea of being reduced to a state of sodden emotion by wrecked villages and grave-crosses and the other obviousnesses that have been so cheapened by journalistic gush. Now I am learning. After all, one's own high-browed dread of the obvious meant only one's dislike of the emotionalism that uses it so unscrupulously: in itself, the obvious is the readiest and most legitimate stimulant of one's best feeling: so long as one does not use the stimulant to get drunk and incapable on: or buy it at a shop. Always, always, though, if we want to get real wisdom and benefit from pain, we must take care that the pain is real and spontaneous, not inspired.

That is why I am always so carefully on guard myself against open attacks, such as that of this devastated area or the Acropolis at Athens. Some of our transatlantic cousins (for instance like Aunt Bethia) have facile tears for ever on tap: a black-clad orphan moves them to the profoundest shallows of their being, and when I answer, brightly, "But how much better than to grow up and wish in vain you were one!" they do not understand in the least, and make wounded eyes at me, and are quite unable to realize that it is not the British brute rebuffing them,

but merely one's natural predetermination not to yield in public to the fraud of a cheap appeal. One cannot in fact, *really* feel, except in solitude. Even in the intimacy of letters like these there lurks the suspicion of one's self: and a sense of one's own inadequacy and of the futile pretentiousness of words is always making me a little conscious and gigglish and guarded, even in the middle of the most heart-to-hearted efforts at unravelling one's real feelings.

3. THE ENDLESS MOOR

Farther and farther we meandered, among the vales of this great vacant moorland. Do not quarrel with me for calling it so incessantly a moorland, for it is as a moorland that you have to see it. It is not one, of course: but that is just what it looks like. Once it was all a pleasant series of cultivated undulations, with hamlets squatting down in the dips, among trees: now it is gone utterly fallow — or, rather, not even that. It has been ploughed and ploughed and ploughed with mines and shells till the whole of its face has been so churned as to be made new. And from such a ploughing has sprung this strange harvest of evil weeds, thistle and couch and *Persicaria* in an unbroken sheet of dull green mildew over the whole scene. And now this rank verdure is gone to rusty tones of russet and brown, till the effect is that of mere moorland grass and sedge; and on the top of every rise you feel as if you were coming to the lunch-hut on the rim of Simonstone between the drives.

4. THE MARTYRED WOODS

Let that picture bite home to your brain, and you will have an actual image of the Somme area. You need not trouble about placing the houses and villages; they are not there any more. They are so absolutely not there that the moorland is more featureless than anything in Scotland, but for the charred black splinters that here and there mark the sites of former woods. In a way these woods are the worst feature of the scene. Those beautiful, brave, unoffending green things are more tragic in death than the ephemeral habitations of men. For once they were lovely and alive: the houses were neither. And now there is nothing left but reefs of gaunt bare stakes, black and grey and blasted white with fire, stiffly and dreadfully sticking up naked to the sky.

I suppose one orphan is really worth more tears than all the woods of Westermain? I am not sure if even my brain says "Yes" to that: I am perfectly certain that all my emotions say "No." Man in the ruck and the vague is only a trifling emmet across the stage of nature. So try to take the impression of these shattered woods as something so sad that one can hardly bear it. I remember, above Chuzenji once, a forest of burned trees: it was terrible enough, and like the grisly Polyp Forest of the Little Mermaid: but it lacked the note of murder that makes the woods of the Somme so tragic. These trees have not died by any accident of nature, however terrible: they have been deliberately massacred. They are our martyrs, just as much as the men who are buried among them; and their death in battle is as honourable. If I were a painter I

should call my picture of these skeletons "Morts au champ d'honneur." It only adds another touch of pity that out of some of them life is again springing at the base: and by now the bony feet are veiled in a surf of new scrub, and future woodlands coming up.

One wood is like another, each rise is like the last: it is impossible to keep track of the itinerary, or of the identity of places, inasmuch as each is exactly like the rest, in not existing any more at all. So what is the good of my telling you how and where I went? — Montauban, Longueval, Bernafay, Sailly-Saillisel, — you could not possibly tell which is which. Their identity has passed into history, and as to what regiments went where, and did what, on this scene where it looks as if nobody had ever yet existed to do anything at all, you probably already know more about it than I do, and, anyhow, can refer to the proper histories for information. To me, the past activity is swamped in the present. Do you think that is a dark saying, about this land whose special keynote is its ghastly emptiness? Wait until you have felt the huge pervasive — "haunt" (it is the only word) that fills it and crowds it. However, I cannot talk about that yet: it is too much on my nerves.

5. THE WICKED, WONDERFUL HILLS

To think of military exigencies and sites and actions in the midst of remembering the Somme desolation is almost as grotesque as the thought that this land has ever been fought over at all. There is now such a primeval calm pervading it that it really is hardly possible to realize how each of those undistinguished ripples of down had to

be bought at so huge a cost of agony and death. Wicked little hills, to have been held by the Boche! Wonderful little hills, to have been won by the Allies! Hill behind hill, each one of them yet another advanced outpost of returning civilization. In their nakedness now, perhaps, one can appreciate their importance as never before.

6. CROWDED EMPTINESS

And I come to see the Somme victories really to have been the watershed of the whole war. All the same, my impressions of the Somme area are a great deal less neat and clear-cut than that as yet: I am wrestling hard in my mind to disentangle them. They are huge and overbearing, but, oddly enough, the agony and death are not among them. They ought to be: all the countryside is populous with graves, either crowded in dense rows of crosses in the dips, or peppered solitary here and there across the face of the fells, half-lost in the waste of weeds. You would think they would overbear one with crowded emotions, and yet it is not so, at least so far. In reality I have not yet felt their presence, or I have not understood it. And yet I feel that there is something here, something enormously big, that I am coming gradually towards understanding: again I am in labour of a realization.

7. A PREHISTORIC WORLD

However, if these things are going to unveil themselves to me, they will: at present I must stick to the one definite point that strikes me. It is this point, I think, that at present blinds me to the others, the human aspects of this scene. For the scene itself is so completely inhu-

man that it seems to have no room for human thoughts or considerations.

All this world on which you are looking — fold over sullen fold of dun and purple moorland, away to the fading blue of the horizons — is a world entirely innocent of man. Man had spent some fifty thousand odd years in making it smiling and cultivated like the land round the *château*: and it has not taken him fifty weeks to undo all those fifty thousand years. You are seeing this strip of country now as it must have been when only incredible great bad-joke beasts roamed over these faceless fells. I have seen deserts and waste lands enough myself, and the vast vacancies of northern Asia: but somehow all these are contemporary, however old; and living man is not an intruder there or a jarring note. Here you feel something absolutely different. It is as if the face of a dead and ravaged harlot had gone mysteriously virgin again in death. One is seeing a thing that one could never have hoped for: the face of Europe as it was before the dawn of humanity. One has gone right away back a dozen million years or so, behind Cromagnon, behind Piltdown, behind *Pithecanthropus* even: and the scene is something one can recognize only through eyes inherited out of the dim ages, from some infinitely far-away ancestor of man.

8. LURKING PERILS

It will not last long, this new virginity of the land. But the desolation will last. Very soon man will come creeping back, of course: but for years he will not dare to make much impression. Nothing could look more impotent and blank than this country, but really it is still full of

wickedness and danger. You could not dig or plough it anywhere. It is thick with unexploded mines and shells, buried in the ground: to say nothing of the innumerable nameless, graveless dead with whom all the soil is clogged and holy. But a mine goes on living indefinitely, it seems, down in the innocent blind dark of the earth. And if a plough or a spade happened on one indiscreetly, the farmer would get a very practical illustration of "Progress."

So there is no point in rebuilding these farms and houses, if they cannot strike root in the country round. Houses, just as much as plants, have to have their supporting fibres: and shell-sown land like this is no suitable soil. So I suppose they will turn all this area of the Somme and the Ancre into a big broad belt of forest. Young trees can be planted light and singly without intruding on the dangers underground. And then they can be left alone indefinitely. And I suppose that not even a shell is absolutely immortal? All the same I think I should prefer to have a batch of Boches to do the spade work. *Tu l'as voulu*, Georges Dandin: those who have made the mess, ought to take the risk of tidying it up again.

But somehow, even to think of the Boche out here is incongruous; there is something a very great deal bigger than the Boche — or even the British — abroad in this great empty country of the Somme. I shall perpetually feel restless and worried until I have gone again and again, and found my way into the very heart of the vision here that overwhelms me all the time, and yet eludes me.

Good-night!

Yours

R. F.

VI. THE DOUBLE EDGE

Château de Noère

I. EMPTINESS CROWDED

There is no leaving off when you are possessed by something like the Somme battlefields. I think of nothing else: and can talk of nothing else. You must not feel it misleading of me to call them empty. Of course, there are camps of living people here, as well as of dead ones; and over the whole landscape abandoned roof-arks of corrugated iron gone brown and rusty. But every trace of habitation, new or old, does only intensify my feeling of a huge haunted solitude. Perhaps I ought not exactly to call it empty — it is more “full of emptiness” that I mean: an emptiness that is not really empty at all. There is something personal about it throughout and I come to think of this piece of country, not as a scene, but as a person.

It only underlines the emptiness, when you see a thin little whitish streak of untidiness, like a worm’s track, straggling dimly across the face of a moorland slope: and realize that it is an abandoned trench of Boche or British, just one lost thread in this amazing tissue of terrors and endurances and glories. And it is so very insignificant. I wonder if the bigness of the drama has any necessary proportion to the smallness of its setting. One’s imagination has always worked differently hitherto: it is a snob, and requires a grandiose scene for large tragedies — castles like Coucy, cities like Rome —

And then here you have only this scrabbled man-deep rut, unnoticeably minute across the landscape, for scene

of the supremest drama that has ever been played. (I do not care if I *am* writing journalese: this *is* the greatest war that ever was: and by that I do really mean the greatest, and not merely the biggest.) What it comes to is, that in a way, though the war has grown so complicated, it has also become small and personal. Man has gone jumping back towards the simplicities of the cave. And the enormous importance of the individual now emerges more gigantic than ever, from his infinitesimal apparent insignificance in the bulk.

2. THE WAR OF TITANS

Up above are the Olympians, the great and little guns, the tanks, the sausages, the planes, with their ramification of nerves and brains and telepathies, reducing men to mere blood-corpuscles in their functioning. Machines are the essential warriors, with science for their seven senses. A wave along a thread, visible or invisible, the thrill of a mechanism, the adjustment of a lever, the pressure of a button, — and away goes death for dozens of people you have never seen or heard of, a dozen miles away and out of sight. It is not a personal human transaction any more. Neither killers nor killed can have the excitement of any very personal animosity in the matter. So that this bloodily bloodless business rules out the primitive element in man. It is vast and cold and accurate, instead of being a small, hot, intimate rough-and-tumble, such as man really understands by fighting. And this frigid scientificness breeds in its men a quite new psychology and courage to match. It is the master of man's emotions, not their vehicle.

3. THE WAR OF RED INDIANS

But at the other end this war has become primitive. After an enormous unnecessary wastage of lives, we have gone back to mediævalism again, and beyond. Body-armour has once more become fashionable wear, and the tin hat is the old helmet, and we have raked up liquid fire out of the Byzantine Empire, and stink-pots out of the Chinese. How long will it be before we go back to bows and arrows and poisoned Dyak blow-pipes? Anyhow, though they would cross themselves from the magic of planes and big guns, and think the gas-bag was the mask of some religious brotherhood, King William and King Harold would be quite as much at home in Ypres as at Senlac.

In some ways we are even more primitive than they were. In those days, in the intervals of battle you crouched up tight in a fortress and made it your centre. But now there is a final slump in fortresses. They are only land dreadnoughts that a pounding will knock to flinders. The one difference is that a million's worth odd of iron and mechanism and men can be sent to the bottom of the sea in a few minutes, but the many more millions' worth of a modern fortress takes a correspondingly increased number of minutes to annihilate. But the difference is not big enough to encourage fortress-building to any considerable extent. And the only real defence that man has got left is his own brain.

4. THE NEW EVOLUTION

I think this new development is going to be as important a step in human evolution as when the frail hairy thing in the tree began first to explore the possibili-

ties of the erect posture and the opposable thumb. We had come to rely so much on our advance in mechanical invention that we had really half abandoned the use of our mental and physical muscles. Imagine what we should most of us do if we were cast ashore on a desert island. In a few days more or less we should throw up our hands and die. We had all grown helpless, like a man who has lain on a sofa so long that he has forgotten the use of his legs. Even the stranded heroes in stories always depend on an adjacent wreck, and not the utmost piety of the Swiss Family Robinson would have enabled them to pull through, if they had not always discovered a handy Cup-of-tea Tree or a Bootlace Bush whenever they wanted. But now, whatever machinery may do for man in the bulk, the individual in the war has to fend for himself or go under. In a way machines brutalize, and make man one of their screws and cogs. But the new, simpler contrivances are man's servants, not his tyrants; his vehicles — and not his masters, like the mechanisms.

5. BARBED WIRE

What could be more simple, for instance, than barbed wire? Yet what more delicately humorous and abominably effective. It is a wicked thing — those thickets of thorns that have borrowed the convoluted bitingness of the bramble, and translated the sinuous, sinister graces of a *Rubus* into terms of iron. It fills me already with a lyrical exaltation of repulsion. I do hate and dread the thing; but it holds my fancy in a horrible fascination — I think, because it is as primitive as a stone axe, and yet as deadly as the newest, most complicated mechanism of gunfire. You

see it everywhere you go: there must be millions beyond millions of miles of it between Dunkirk and Trieste. Every front line, as it advances or recedes, has this primitive strip of protection in front of it; and when it changes, the barbed wire fence is left behind. So you cannot go a quarter of a mile in any part of this country without long, abandoned stretches of it, sere and dead among the weeds, either snarled about till it looks like some monstrous Australian bramble, or else cat's-cradled straight between stake and stake in comparatively candid labyrinths. You get it in the foreground, you get it in the middle distance, and across the far fell-faces you see black, blurred strips that look like burnt gorse, but are really more jungles of barbed wire. And now it is all gone to waste.

Waste is an odd word for it, when one remembers the work that every length of this wicked weed has done — the dead and the dying caught in its merciless mesh, and kept hanging on its thorns for hours and days, as if the President of the Immortals were a hungry shrike, intent upon provisioning his larder amply. But so it is. I cannot help dwelling on the awful waste of time and labour and money spent on producing this noxious thing when they might all have been doing so much kindlier work. And now it is not even actively wicked any more. I long to unravel every skein of it and roll it up neatly in a nice domestic ball again. In time it will be taken up and made over again into something useful. But it will be a hateful work. In any case nothing could well be more hateful than it now is, browned and blackened with rust, and stake-deep everywhere in weeds, the very emblem of desolation. It makes me feel almost sorry for it, in a queer, sentimental way —

a thing that cannot be wicked any longer, yet will not, and cannot, be good. Abortive evil is a tragic thing — when only the will to wickedness is left, without the power, and with no compensating vent in any other direction. How very dreadful, for instance, to be lagoon on a desert island!

6. CAMOUFLAGE

But after all, even barbed wire is a form of mechanism, — though perhaps as low-down a one as could be conceived, — a mere amoeba as compared with a sixty-pounder. The real thing about the human side of the war is the sheer fun of it. In certain aspects the war is nothing but a glorious, gigantic game of hide and seek — *camouflage* is nothing else. It is not only the art of making things invisible, but also of making them look like something else. Even the art of inconspicuousness is subtle and exciting. What glory it must be to splash your tents and lorries all over with wild waggles of orange and emerald and ochre and umber, in a drunken chaos, until you have produced a perfect futurist masterpiece which one would think would pierce the very vaults of heaven with its yells. However, as pandemonium produces numbness in the ear, so I suppose a Lost-Dogs'-Home-at-Battersea in chromatics does deaden visibility in a dun-coloured ensemble.

But disguise is an even higher branch of the art: you go on to make everything look like something else. Hermit crabs and caddis-worms become our masters. Down from the sky peers the microscopic midget of a Boche plane: he sees a tree — but it may be a gun: he sees a gun — but it may be only a tree. And so the game of hide and seek goes on, in a steady acceleration of ingenuity on both sides,

till at last the only logical outcome will be to have no camouflage at all. You will simply put out your big guns fair and square in the open, because nobody will ever believe, by that time, that anything really is what it looks like.

As far as the guns go, the war is developing into a colossal fancy dress ball, with immunity for the prize: wolves in sheeps' clothing are nothing to these gentle shepherdesses of the countryside. The more important they are, the more meekly do they shrink from notice under dominos of boughs or sods, or strawberry-netting tagged over with fluffets of green and brown rags. And sometimes they lurk under some undiscoverable knoll in a coppice, and do their barking through a little hole from which you would only expect rabbits, not shells. It must be the most endless joy to go on planning these disguises. One would lie awake at night wondering how to make one's gun look like a dog-kennel, or a dog-kennel conceal a gun. But, of course, the individual *camouflage* is even more exciting yet.

7. MEN AND WOMEN

I do not know how its beauties would appeal to you, though. You might think the whole thing silly. Women are much more barbarous and barbaric than men, of course: but also much older. A woman is as old as Cleopatra by the time she is six, but a man keeps hold of his coltishness to the end of his days. The most learned and capable and brilliant of them will go on tossing a biscuit off the toe of his boot and catching it in his mouth, as long as he is able; whereas his counterpart in the other sex will be sitting sternly at a table studying the works of Mrs. Sidney Webb. And I need not ask you which is the real

wisdom. History and evolution have given the answer. The eternal child wins all the time. The eternal child is the immortality of man: it is the only thing that gets him along through life.

8. HIDE AND SEEK

And, of course, this fun-sense of his has full play in this new warfare. It is all "I spy," on terms of life and death: the other fellow *must not* spy, or you hear of it instantly, through your skull. Think how it must sharpen up the civilization-sodden intelligence of a man, to have to depend for dear life on noticing every movement in a bush and every opening in a bank. Now we are getting back with one hand what we had lost by giving up the other to machinery. We are growing to make the best of both worlds, the mechanical and the human, without giving up our mental balance by relying exclusively on either. I only wish I could give you an idea of the devices and ingenuities that these grown-up hide-and-seekers have elaborated. All sorts of ludicrously simple things, the more ludicrously simple the better.

Every blank-faced trench rampart of sandbags has its hidden eyes — eyes perfectly wide-awake all the time, and winking at you wickedly with a rifle. But for your life you could not spot them, until you had had weeks of training, and learned the real meaning of every tiny unevenness or discolouration or bit of darkness. And even then you have to learn to guess which of these is harmless — so as to blind the others with your own fire. Or there is an innocent, untidy, earthy bank, a dump of old boots and tins and bottles and tea-pots without spouts. But any one

of those forlorn oddments may also be the eyelid of a rifle. Only you do not know which — until you have found out! In the beginning of the war you did not find out. Everything was neat and tidy and civilized and well-arranged: so you merely got killed.

It has taken us long experience to reconquer the primitive shifts and cunning of our ancestors. What would have seemed utterly childish to any soldier a few years since, is now his essential wisdom. You are bound to have eyes in every eyelash, and a wireless at the end of every nerve, if you are to come out a prize-winner in this game of hide and seek. Even in this, the most mechanical and vast of all wars, it is the individual red Indian who ultimately wins.

They do not go to Napoleon and Wellington nowadays for inspiration, they go to the praying mantis and the leaf-butterflies. Look at those trees in that avenue — that third tree in particular, that projecting bough, now botanically and æsthetically accurate. All is motionlessly silent: rural peace pervades the whole world. And, if you meditate on this a tithe of a second too long, out of that bough, most improperly and unexpectedly, there comes a little streak of fire through your heart. You must not put your trust in the tranquillity of nature nowadays, any more than in princes or any child of man. Who knows whether that molehill really *is* a molehill? That corn-stook among the others, does it really look quite as a normal corn-stook should? What a scandalously untidy sight that heap of potato-peelings and old sacks! — until suddenly it shoots.

I tell you, it is wonderful and fearful, this game, in its fascination -- keeping you on razor's edge and razor's

edge of vital uncertainty. It is the very apex of sport; it makes big-game shooting into a croquet tournament. All the time you are playing for your life with eyes and brains for counters. It must be a potent illumination and stimulant for the human mind — which five years ago would almost have wanted a policeman to help it across the street, or a moving stairway to get it up to the second floor of Harrod's. And, of course, it is a joyous thing to find the eternal Boy-Scoutness of Man jumping up to life again. But really what enthalls me so about it, is not so much that, as the possibilities I foresee from its development.

9. BRAIN-DEVELOPMENT

For all this is bound to level up the human intelligence, from the highest officer to the newest Tommy. The whole character of everybody must be changing with the unfolding needs of a war like this. There is a boom in brains all round, and a slump in the stupidity that always used to be associated with military men and matters. I know many people would not agree to that. For a long time yet there will be the relics of that curious rigid wooden-headedness which makes military tribunals and offices a byword for unintelligence. But, if there is any logic at all in events, and any truth in the law of cause and effect, then these are mere side-issues, and the stupid official at the tribunal (or wherever it may be) is merely a survival from former traditions. The tradition of centuries does not die quite dead in one generation.

War in the old days did certainly put a premium on stupidity. It was the specialist business of the gentleman, which meant that the less he knew about anything else,

the better gentleman and the better soldier he was considered to be, and the more narrowly intense was his scorn for anybody who did know anything else. A soldier could not have any unmanly, degrading fiddlings with such frivolities as art and literature. That is still the stage at which the Prussian officer is lingering: he is a survival from the days when it was not good form for Rawdon Crawley to do anything but fight and drink and have women. But Rawdon Crawley lies buried miles deep by now, beneath the casualty lists of our last two wars, and the whole atmosphere has changed entirely. The premium is put on brains to-day, and what a successful soldier's mind has got to have is breadth, scope, and elasticity, not the hide-bound hardness of the old ways. The survivors of the old Junker tradition will all soon be safe in Kensal Green, and the New Army cannot possibly breed the same type of mind as the old. Very likely it will have its own stupidities, but they will be different ones.

Everything has changed. The New Army is not two halves — rulers and ruled: it is one big brain, working in harmony all through, cell by cell and fibre by fibre. You could not take away any one lobe without damaging the efficiency of the whole thing. I know what clap-trap has been written about the new relations of officers and men, but that does not alter the fact that the change has happened.

10. SELECTION BY SHRAPNEL

At first I was afraid for the future. Shells and shrapnel scatter alike upon the stupid and the intelligent. But then so they did also when it was bows and arrows and

arbalests and arquebuses, and there is no more reason now than there ever was, why our best men should be killed off, and only the second-rate be left to breed. In fact, the intelligent now have even better chance of surviving than before. For in former times the most intelligent of all were either driven by pious sovereigns to the stake or by pious impulses to the cloister: whereas, nowadays, if the chances of "civilization" allow, they can go on perpetuating themselves and their ideas indefinitely by books and babies.

II. THE COMING "DEMOCRACY"

And what is to become of it all? Men in the bulk, after this, will no longer have the easygoingness of the slug-wit, or the mere indirected discontent of the grumbler. I do not foretell results, and I do not believe in Jacqueries. England has always blown off the steam of her revolutions by instalments, instead of banking them down till she has to erupt in a cataclysm. Also, she is always talking so much about logical extremes, that she never goes to them. But, although I do not like the word "democracy," I want to mean by it man's intelligent sense of himself as an individual, intelligently merged in the sense of himself as part of a big whole. And in that sense I do believe that, for the first time in our history, we are on the edge of a real democracy.

Change has a way of maturing underground, as it were, unnoticed for a long while, and then breaking out violently in a burst. I think we are about ripe for that burst now: and that the war is going to bring it. However, this is all like a Chinese shooting off a gun, or Aunt Emily letting off

an argument, nobody can possibly say what will happen or where the bullet will fly.

And in any case, in saying this, I wanted also to pull my own mind away from the Somme. It is too much on my nerves, so I was afraid it might get on yours. I go again and again; it grows upon me and crowds me out of myself. And if I let myself go to what I feel about it at present, I am afraid that the result might be unbalanced. So give me a few days yet, to settle down if I can. Do not really think I have shirked — although perhaps I have. The fear of the emotional is the beginning of wisdom.

Yours

R. F.

VII. THE DAWN

Château de Noère

I. DELVILE WOOD

I have put off writing for a whole week, in the hope that I should settle down. But it is no good. Feelings accumulate in me all the time. I have been again and again to the Somme: it etches itself black and blazing on my mind. But it was only in Delvile Wood that I at all began to understand about the dead. Delvile is just another wrecked wood as the others. But the places where visions take hold of us are never the same as the rest. It is a particularly bad place, perhaps. It lies in a hollow, and there was worse fighting here even than elsewhere, and the ground is more wildly torn and tattered into hills and holes among the stumps of the dead trees. And the whole place is full of graves. There is hardly a hollow without one. And even these are symbols of hundreds of other dead here that have no mark of burial — miserable, miscellaneous messes of men, huddled hastily underground. And over this chaos the splintered trees still stand on guard, stiff and lifeless and blackish-grey above the surf of weeds; and the silent emptiness of it all seems more than ever crowded and full of sound.

2. GRAVES

The graves are very neat at first. Six feet or so of a bare earth hummock in a hollow, with a string of wire to enclose it, and a little wooden cross with a tin label tacked on. Often there is nothing on it but "Unknown British

Soldier" or "Unknown German Soldier," and then one realizes that when they came to bury him, there was nothing left of him to know him by. Sometimes, of course, there is the name, and always a number on the label: and occasionally there is a bleary rain-sodden envelope nailed over the place, with more details inside.

But you cannot leave things like that in the wilds. Very soon the mound is crumbled down by rain, and covered with weeds till you can hardly tell it in the tangle: and the wire goes anyhow, and the cross slants and tumbles, and the envelope is obliterated, and the tin tag comes off. All Delville Wood is full of these dim mounds, on their way to being forgotten: and it would be a sad, squalid scene if it were either sad or squalid at all. But it somehow is not. It feels more like a crowded rest-cure.

3. THE UNDYING DEAD

For, in fact, I cannot see these graves as genuinely holding anything. I do not feel these dead as merely dead bodies, so much broken-up bones and ugliness. Where is the use of sentimentalizing falsely over graves and their inmates? There is nothing sanctifying, in itself, in the mere fact of having become defunct. No doubt a number of these dead would have been extremely tiresome people in life, who smoked disgusting tobacco or trod on one's feet in tubes. Then what is there so wonderful about John Jones dead that there was not about John Jones living? And why does he grip hold of me, in a quiet place like this, with such a sense of wonder and awe and envy? For it is no mere physical tragedy that his grave makes me think of; mark that. That side of things is mysteriously trans-

scended by something remote and calm and grand, away behind all this. What it means, of course, is that it is not the being dead that matters: it is the how and why and wherefore of one's death. Man is not so much his mere self: he is the manifestation of an idea. And often the idea can only prove itself, and win free, by bursting the body in pieces.

Do you see what I mean? These John Joneses and people, they did not want to die, and they did not want to be hurt. What they really wanted was to come safe through with a whole skin, back to their wives and their babies and their beer. Of course, they hated it all, and grumbled and shivered and swore. But, though they did not know it, they were something far larger than their own existences and their own desires: and they went stolidly through accordingly, out by a dreadful gate, on into further developments, I have no doubt, as blindly splendid as the instinct that carried them there.

About deliberated choices and heroisms there is nothing, by comparison, so very admirable: the martyr going to the stake is going there because he wants to, whether out of conviction or contradictiousness does not greatly matter. The point is that he is really having his own way, though at a cost. But the truly marvellous thing is to pay the cost when it not only means not getting your own way, but getting very much the reverse instead. To do what you do not like, in order to get what you do not want, is certainly the finest thing in man's range. It is what is meant by "He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

And you must not pretend, either, that all these John

Joneses were obeying nothing bigger than their commanding officer and the Conscription Act. For even those, in a way, are only incarnations of the man's own will. Nobody really obeys anything in this world except his own desire to obey a something he believes in. He may invest that desire in any governor or government he chooses, but the truth is there behind. Even obedience to a tyrant merely means that you have put your will in pawn, just as tired people put their brains in pawn to a church, to buy a kind of peace.

So that there can be no unhappiness here for lovely youth laid away underground. It is not, because it cannot be. Of course, there is the wreckage of the body: but the thing that goes on shines so violently in my eyes that they are dazzled out of seeing anything further. Those graves do not in fact hold anything. They are only symbols: and symbols of something splendid. I tell you, if one does not try to feel things here, and does not try to burke them either, one grows in time to realize that this whole country is not full of dead and silence, but of wings. I am not fond of philandering with spiritualism and states of the dead: it seems to me rather futile, unwholesome nonsense so far as it has gone. And, also, I do not feel to want it personally, because I am so absolutely certain, myself, of the future state and developments of the dead that it seems to me silly to waste time and money over *planchettes* and mediums, merely to prove what I am sure of already.

4. THE IRRELEVANT BODY

Out here, anyhow, even if you were one of the unhappy people who hunger for proofs and confirmations of

hope, you could not escape a tremendous contagious confidence in the future of things and beings. You know the French are quite certain that their dead are still active from their graves, guarding and helping the living in battle? It is not a belief they ever talk of, but it lives at the bottom of their minds perpetually. And that is merely a translation into French of what everybody is bound to feel here, in a language older and more universal than French or English or anything else. It is that there are no dead.

Of course, no one can escape the human pathos of these graves. One would not be human if one did. But it is a bad folly to surrender to: it hurts, and it does no good. After all, the things we starve for so fiercely, if we let ourselves, — faces, forms, and voices, — are really no more than irrelevancies: we should never have cared for them at all if they had not happened to belong to some one we liked. That gives me the whole of what I mean. It is the Something inside the somebody, that one loves, in reality, — not the accidents of his outside. It would not matter to you and me if either of us lost limbs or took smallpox. But it would matter enormously if there came any really vital change in our combination — if I became a curate, or you became a Catholic.

Do you remember the man in "Vasanta," trying to console her by pointing out that a disincorporate lover is much more permanently on tap, so to speak, than a living one? —

"And in the dissolution of his limbs,
More naked in the passion of his truth."

If you can see any meaning in that, it does mean something: and the more you let it, the more it means. Out here,

alone in this place, one does stand naked in front of things, and it certainly, I think, comes out very clearly in the new bareness, that one's dead, being dead, have really become one's own and one's self everlastingly, much more than they ever were in life. There is no loss possible of anything one has ever genuinely possessed.

“ For all roads meet in the great end of things,
Where all roads cease. . . . ”

It is a sufficiently vague consolation to be allowable.

5. INDIANS

And yet this land, so apparently dead and empty, has an occult life of its own, for in its hollow places there are camps full of cheery little Indians, a stumpy, small folk, clad in a Tibetan-looking fabric like a very loose-textured Harris tweed. They are in every shade of dark brown, towards an unpolished boot-button black; they are the scavengers, and come out in gangs on a fine day to pick up the odds and ends, human or otherwise, that may still be lying in the grass. And they are remaking the roads, too, with red-cheeked soldiers gesticulating orders. It must have been some one with a very nice taste in the fantastic who first suggested using these small brown children of the sun and the South. Chinese one could have easily understood: on this bleak, Northern-looking desolation they would have been quite in keeping. But these little people are a perpetual joke to me each time I see them. What can they think of it all? — except that, no doubt, they do not think, and are content to be merely happy at their strange work. At least while the sun shines. But how

about the winter? Will not these poor little parrakeets turn miserable and draggled and depressed, in the cold and the slush and the wind and the unheard-of dreadfulness of snow? But I suppose they will all be put back in their cage before the worst begins to happen.

It is a strange field, and strange gleaners and a strange gleaning. Where would be the use of my telling you about Martinpuich and Contalmaison, and so on? — "Give it a name, I beg," said Sairey, — but what point is there in giving a name if you cannot also give a local habitation as well? And of local habitation these names no longer have a trace: the most experienced majors and generals, map-flapping in the wind, get lost nowadays among the dead samenesses of the very scenes they once fought over themselves. It is all one rust-coloured, enormous monotony of moorland till you get back again to the big highroad that runs between Albert and Bapaume, on its ways to Amiens and Arras. I suppose this is the road that originally brought Manon Lescaut in the Arras coach to Amiens? Manon certainly would not know the country now!

6. POZIÈRES

Where you join the main road there are the ruins of Pozières. At least you cannot rightly call them ruins. It is more like a big abandoned brick-yard with all the heaps covered up in docks and nettles and weeds. It is a particularly wild convulsion of shell-holes and graves, too, haphazard among the hollows. So that you get more idea of violent fighting and death here than in most of the other obliterated villages, where there are not usually such signs of men buried on the spot, as they fell and were found.

Just across the road there is the crater of an enormous mine. It is like the bowl of a big pot-hole, quite ghastly in the unbroken, naked whiteness of its chalk slopes. Going up or down it is like being on one of those brilliant white limestone screes that you get in the Dolomites, except that starveling poppies and stray pats of goose-grass are the only vegetation — unless you count the characteristic war-flora, which is represented here as usual by derelict snarls of *Barbedwiria volubilis* in the depths of the crater.

Among the jumbles of Pozières you sometimes see people. French families uncannily appear on the scene, as butterflies blossom on a warm November day. Densely black in crape they wander among the hummocks and holes, hunting for their own particular dead. When they have found him they dress up his cross elaborately with flags and palms and wreaths till it looks like a stall at a bazaar. Somehow it seems garish and unsympathetic and hard. You feel that the dead are not in any need of these clamorous cast-iron commemorations. The place is squalid and desolate enough, indeed, and yet there is a certain void, quiet dignity about it that laughs at the cheap assertiveness of cemeteries.

7. TANKS FORLORN

After this the road goes stark and straight, up the line of the great advance. You cannot make any head or tail of its details now, the huge bare landscape is so blank and indistinguishable. To right and left and everywhere it is scrawled and scrabbled over with the whitish scars of the trenches, and the blackened blurs of barbed wire in a confusing, indefinite repetition. And on the moorland there

are odds and ends of battle or occupation — empty shelters, and railway lines, and a little Boche train tumbled off its track. The most suggestive sights are the poor lonely tanks stranded here and there on the brown levels of the moor. They look more pathetic and animal than ever, like whales left high and dry on a lee shore. Or sometimes they have fallen on their sides in a ditch, and so lie: and sometimes seem to be rooting desperately downwards with their snouts as if they had gone out of life in an agony, trying to hide themselves from sight as a decent beast should. But they are most impressive and tragic as they just squat motionless, rusty and forlorn and dead, out on the open face of the fell. They are much more actual than the reconstructed prehistorics at Sydenham, in which our imaginations have no part.

And after this, when you have done with the open country, you get back again into the region of ruins and blasted trees. And then over the slow dip beyond, suddenly the Butte de Varlencourt appears on the top of the far rise.

8. THE PLACE OF A SKULL

Anyhow, it would be a strange enough thing to come on here, this abrupt pimple emerging on the crest of an open country of long, leisurely lines without ever a height or a scarp. I suppose it must have been the barrow of some remote king — so far as one can judge. But that is not very far. It has been fought over and fought over, to and fro, by Boche and British, till it has been churned quite bare of life. It rises on the top of the moorland in a stark-naked dome of chalk. Not to make a phrase, you cannot help seeing it at once as the absolute Place of a

Skull, the Calvary of Christendom. And three wooden crosses sprout against the sky from the bald profile of its summit to finish the suggestion.

The Butte is one of the keynotes of the war. The French, with their flair for the significant, have recognized this, and have set the place aside, not to be tidied up, but to be left just as it is for ever, as a memorial of what our men achieved there. Of course, it will not stay as it is for long — certainly not for ever. Nature obliterates things even quicker than man. But for the present it is a museum island in the cleaned-up sea of the Somme area. You may not take anything away: the most inveterate relic-hunter must starve amid plenty. And as you toil up the moorland, from shell-hole to shell-hole, towards the grisly white Golgotha high above, there is not one of them that has not its fragments of equipment lying scattered, or twisted old rusty rifle: lengths of barbed wire spring up at you spitefully wherever you tread in the long grass; and when you do get to the actual Butte itself, its nakedness is ruinous and sickly with smashed dug-outs all round, and collapsing shrapnel-shattered roofs of corrugated iron, and bolt-holes of darkness half-battered in and not pleasant to look down into. The Butte is grim and dreadful in its air of catastrophe gone cold. It is like a dead face frozen stiff in horror. Round the base of the barrow itself there are green, scummy pools in the shell-hollows: and in their clearer depths are rifles rusting to decay, and dud-shells, and ugly odds and ends of trappings and leather. All the time you are expecting to see something uglier still. Even the earth is tainted and vile.

I hate the earth of these haunted places. It is very

nasty — dank with unnatural juices, unholily clammy, greasy, horrible. You cannot put a spade in anywhere without turning up something that you would rather have left lying quiet. At one point somebody had tried: I do not know why. He did not persevere. For out of the foul-smelling, sticky ground there came at once a filthy stew of clothing and piece of pelvis. The whole place, in fact, is dense with dead as a bulb-garden with daffodils. One of them is lying out. He is hard to find, for all the fell is one labyrinth of shell-pits, impossible to tell apart. But at last you do find him.

Formerly, he was decently buried like everybody else: probably by his brother Boches. But in the great days of the Butte shell-hole was always wiping out shell-hole, as one raindrop smashes out the print of its predecessor on sand. And in the course of this the Boche has come unburied again. He makes an ugly, humbling sight, jostled here and there, half in and half out of the caked yellow clay of the bank. There is a sodden twistage of grey mess which is trousers, and a loose little scatter of browned old bones, and a skull with tiny ants swarming across its dome. And among these, two enormous black Wellington boots: in their depths there is still a wet breccia of socks and feet. That is all that is left. The Australians go up and play with him: trundle the skull, and arrange the bones in patterns: in time he will disappear. And the strangest thing about it is the miserable littleness of these odds and ends. What is it that goes out of a man that leaves him so very much smaller when he is dead than he was when he was alive? This skull, — it is absurd, — so neat and so round and so small. And yet, when it was in actual wear, it prob-

ably looked as large as yours or mine. There is a certain grimness in the thought that a thing like that, or hardly bigger, once held Bismarck, and all the accumulating evilness of the world. Or, on the other hand, might just as easily have held a Buddha.

The top of the Butte is a bare, bald, white Calvary, but the crosses are a bathos — big, collective testimonials to various regiments, propped and poised on the ribs of the shattered dome. But otherwise the place is so impressive that it knocks one all to pieces, and then puts one together again. You look down from the summit, out over miles upon miles of desolate, brown-green uplands, dotted everywhere with grave-crosses. And as far as the eye can see, the entire landscape is pitted and pock-marked with shell-holes. There is no yard of it left virgin, from end to end of the view. It is as if the entire face of the world had had smallpox. Nowhere else does one get quite such a picture of what a shelled country is. Of course, nowadays, and at this time of the year, it is a panorama of green and russet; but in winter, and before the last shell-explosions gave the scene its final model — what an ever-changing chaos of mud and chalk and death, away to the horizon! And then there blazed out a fever of poppies, and sheeted the dead country in scarlet; and afterwards the grass and the weeds. It is a very big sight. It hurts: but more with the weariness of absorption than anything else. A single human soul is too small by itself to contain it.

9. THE BUILDING OF THE BODHISAT

I do know now, though, why I had to say that the place seemed full of wings. The expression is bad, of

course; words are so inadequate, and all that "wings" suggests is flapping feathers and a botheration of birds. What I want to give you is a strange, high feeling of crowded, invisible movement, ordered and unresting. I understand why I had not been conventionally saddened about the dead, or made to feel their presence. For they have all gone on into something else much bigger than their own mere individual continuance. I dislike seeming mystical; mysticism is so often merely the flatterer's name for unharnessed emotionalism or woolliness of thought. But, after all, what we cannot personally seize or define is not necessarily non-existent: denial is as positive a folly as assertion in dealing with the infinite dark that surrounds our mortal lives. And sometimes there do come gleams. So I can fairly tell you, that when one is up there, lonely among the unimaginable lonelinesses of the Butte, one does somehow cease to be alone, and cease to be one's self. One is swept away into an annihilating unity which answers the riddle of the war and its millions of apparent dead. For, as you sit there, it is almost literally as if you could hear the drumming of a heart, the pulses of a Buddha booming up towards his birth.

Of course, I do not mean any specific coffee-coloured person in a bald head and bare feet and a yellow frock. There is no need even to call him a Buddha, though that name is the one that comes readiest to my own mind. But who or what the Comer may be, or what you call him, does not really matter in the least. What does matter is that the Big People, and the Biggest People of all, are never mere haphazard accidents in time, stray currants peppered casually in the pudding of history. They are strictly logical

outcomes, culminating results of millions after millions of fine lives, moulded out of fine thoughts and moulding further fine thoughts and lives, on and on down the ages. Even as heat, growing in intensity, is bound at last inevitably to break into visible flame, so a Buddha is the ultimate visible flame of humanity's increasing glow. He is the periodical incarnation of the world's universal upward drive, in the same way that Anti-Buddhas like Bismarck are incarnations of whole centuries and ages of false standards and material thinking, and all the accumulated evil and anguish of egoism. And as the upward drive, though infinitely vast and sure, is also infinitely slow, it is not to be wondered at if the periods of the Great Ones are very few and far between. "Hard it is to be born in the lifetime of a Buddha," says the Sutra.

10. THE BIRTH OF THE BUDDHA

But what I realize now, out here, is that our children or our children's children may actually see the Comforter in the flesh. I feel the presence here of so gigantic a heroic uplift of mankind, that the aspiration, the universal glory of it, cannot much longer be banked down. The pace of the world's development has furiously increased in the last four years. Needs and hungers, too, in these four years, have intensified to starvation point, and such a demand as that engenders its own supply. In a way it becomes its own supply. And that supply, when it takes form, is the Comforter, the Buddha.

Legend still puts more than two thousand years before the Manifestation of Maitreya, but terms of time are nothing more than convenient fictions, and in these last

four years of ours, we have surely compressed the hells of at least two thousand. Nor is it for nothing, I now believe, that legend has always foretold that the next Supreme Comforter will arise in the West. We are making him every moment, at an increasing rate: and the significance of these dead who are not dead is that the things they did and the things they bore and the things they were, and are, are all combining now in the blood-beat of the imminent Comforter. Every grave out here strikes off so many years of delay before his birth. Once more the world is in labour of its cure.

No wonder the scene is filled with wings!

Yours

R. F.

VIII.-THIÈPVAL

Château de Noère

I. FAITH

It is easy enough to walk upon the sea if you have faith, but the moment you begin wondering you begin to sink. If I listened to the Uncles, they would make me hesitate as to whether all I have seen and felt may not be merely my own cowardly determination to see things that are not there, in order to escape from seeing the things that are: or that even more deadly optimism which (being merely another name for the indifference of utter egoism) is gallantly determined to persevere, to the last drop of everybody else's blood, and plumes itself particularly, from its armchair, on having "given" a son or two to the war. For the Uncles would have it that this war is not (as I believe) really the culminating abscess in a long, feverish series of eruptions from our age-long ill-health, but yet another repetition of its many predecessors, only worse, with more and worse yet to follow, indefinitely down through time. It cannot be so. The misery of error at last attains its highest bearable limit, and then begets its own reaction automatically. And this limit, it seems to me, we have now reached: and this war is the climax, the blackest hour, that of itself begets the inevitable dawn.

Not for a second will I weaken in my hold of what I have found here. I get hold of it more and more: or it gets hold of me. And when you have got the big things at last within your digestion, then you can see the little ones much more

clearly, without being distracted any longer by inexpressiblenesses that you have not yet been able to grasp. I am finding that now: the smaller sights come much more easy and perceivable and poignant. I go again and again to the Somme, and there seems no end. Thièpval, for instance, is a place that one must see many times.

2. THIÈPVAL

The first time I got there was at the end of a long, emotional day. I did not very much want to go, for I felt so tired that I feared my power of seeing might be exhausted. However, on our way home we decided to explore across the fells in search of Thièpval, if only to find out where it was. We diverged from the main road, and away up a very raw little bumpy lateral track that crawled aimlessly up and down over the moorland without seeming to have anywhere particular to go. Crowds of Indians were making it or restoring it. When we asked them the way, they grinned with glee, but made no other response. Nor were their supervising Tommies any more helpful. You cannot, indeed, expect any one to know his way about this country, not even those who were over it during the campaign, — still less new people imported on the scene to make roads and rails. There is nowhere a way to know, nor a place to know a way to, nor anything to know it by if there were. So on we crawled experimentally, jumping and bumping among the shell-pits of the red surface: gradually we left the Indians behind, and there was no longer the smallest trace of human life over the face of the moorland. It was like a dream — meandering slowly about on what seemed like a primeval world. However, we did at last strike a better

road, down in a shallow dip where there was also a very young railway line, with a small "Puffing Billy" engine on it.

This was a centre of tidying-up. At the crossways, and along by the road itself, there were dumps of salvage — helmets, shell-cases, rifles, and every sort of odd and end of equipment stacked up in heaps, of pitiful, repulsive rags and dank leathern oddments. The Indians had done their gleaning thoroughly; and one realized what labour had yet remained to be achieved, even after the first clearance-up of the dead. People who cherish "sooveneers," and like to give large prices for them, would have been sickened here by these countless loads of treasures, piled up ready to be carted away and remade. As for me, I hate the things. In the first place, they are all of them hideously ugly; and in the second, the whole of their meaning is ugly too. And even their pathos is rather obvious and unprofitable — water-bottles out of which poor devils have drunk who will never drink again, and helmets with great torn shrapnel-holes, lying about together pell-mell in heaps and hummocks, and looking no more than a tinker's dump of worn-out trash.

It was now beginning to darken toward the gloaming as we gradually mounted the far rise, in the hope that on the top of it we might find Thièpval. We did, and Thièpval came upon me as a wholly unexpected culmination of the day: I had not been prepared for any such surprise, but only for yet another repetition of blurred ruin like the rest: it is that, indeed, — but it is a great deal more beside. On the last high brow of the down Thièpval once lived, and down below, in a rich curve, its woodland slopes fell sud-

denly steeply away to the willow-marches and runnels of the Ancre, curling narrowly along beneath, with other wooded hills rising on the farther side. You could not have a more lovely view, with the gentle stretches of the high land behind, and, in front, far out over the depths of the Ancre valley, far, open distances of landscape away to the horizon.

It stood among trees of its own, too, with gardens all round it. For this was once the Château de Thièpvál. As for the village, that ranged along the roadside coming up the hill. But now you could not so much as guess where it had been. Even the castle you can only tell because it is a rather larger, wider, more massive mound of ruins among the rest of the ramparts and hummocks on the top of the hill; and the trees all round it are a forest of skeleton trunks, grey and leprous. Right down to the river the woodland continues: it must have been a view like Donwell once. In the bottom the trees are oddly intact still, but as they mount the slope they grow more and more bare and ragged: and on the crown of the hill there is no bough or leaf left living. All the time I wandered I could only think of the house-parties that once happened here, and how one would have walked on the terrace with Mme. de Thièpvál, and prattled to her about how beautiful her woods were, and her view. And now — the whole thing is melted into jumbled mounds of bricks and mud, and the wood is blasted in death, and the view laid waste, and Mme. de Thièpvál gone — where? Only Powers of Darkness hold house-parties now in Thièpvál.

3. THE HAUNTED WOOD

I do not mean to forge impressions, but in the calm of that green gloaming Thièpval was extraordinarily active with evil. I roamed, nervously, over the débris of the château. Baths and beds and shutters, all convulsed and torn and twisted, still lay in and out of the slopes of the ruins, like dreadful carcasses half-buried. For Thièpval has not been tidied up yet, like the rest of the moorland; the Indians have not arrived there, though they are on the way. It still lies dead, and exactly as it died, with all its wreckage still strewn at haphazard. The ground is churned with shell-holes, deep in treacherous weeds; and if you descend a hundred yards over the brow, you find the woodland white with trenches, very ghostly in the twilight, and bestrewn with their bleak rubbish of tins and shells and sandbags and sodden cast-aways of rags. Along the lower hem of the plantation runs the biggest, once the British, front line. It is heavily silent now, with melting sides and a scum of weeds beginning to film over the whiteness of the chalk. Out on the open face of the down beyond, grave-crosses stand here and there among the rust-coloured tussocks of grass, as each man died and was buried where he fell.

In the wood the silence grew heavier and heavier as the dark came down: at intervals, behind the front-line trench among the ramifications of the other ones, there are elaborate deep dug-outs, shored up with wood and very often half-collapsed. I mountain-climbed arduously over the crumbling sides and high ramparts of the trenches, and peered into the dug-outs. Here, too, there still lay the mess

of abandoned occupation: their wooden stairways vanished down into a suggestive dark, and out of the black depths there clambered a cold, wet smell. It is not a mere worked-up picture of obvious ugliness that I want to give you here, but a sense of the disgusting "haunt" of that devil's wood, and how the silent mouths of those dug-outs kept me in a real grue all the time, lest things should emerge that ought not to. I tell you, it is not comfortable to be alone in a place where evil is so powerful and oppressive.

In fact, it got hold of me so much that at last I began to wonder if I was being quite honest with myself, or whether all this fuss and twittering might not be mere histrionics, engendered deliberately by the gloomy stillness of a quite ordinary ruined wood, and my own consciousness of the particularly horrible battle that had raged here. So I felt that I must test myself, by returning to Thièpval some time in broadest daylight. As it was, I was quite relieved when at last we got away, and slipped steeply downhill under the ridge into the willow-channels of the Ancre (there was a camp of Indians lurking at the foot of the hill), and so away into soft, open, lovely country, at first comparatively, and soon absolutely, immune from horrors.

4. THE GARISH DAY

But when I did go back to Thièpval, the impression had not faded at all: very much the reverse. It was brilliant midday, and in the sunshine the desolation was crude and blatant. One has to go cautiously among the pitfalls — the weed-grown hills and holes and ridges and ranges that make the whole wood a labyrinth of difficult going. For there is barbed wire lying everywhere, and unexploded

bombs and grenades, and the great iron footballs of trench-mortars peering out of the banks. Often the abrupt pits are veiled in a Sargasso Sea of couch or persicaria that makes an apparent smooth green carpet: unless you lift your feet high, and probe in front of you, and put them very carefully down again, you are always going through into unsuspected depths. And sometimes under that sea there are still things on which you would not wish to walk. Once, at least, through the rank surf, I plunged on something unseen that gave beneath my tread with a shallow, hollow crunch, and made me feel it wisest not to stop and examine what it was.

5. MADAME'S GARDEN

Anyhow, I am now quite sure that very old evil forces have been let loose in Thièpvál. We found a bottle-neck dungeon broken open to the daylight, so who knows what ancient hideousness may not have been touched to life again by the new ones? In the hard sunshine the ruin was merely raw and impulsive, and the blistered white mounds of the trenches more ghastly: but none of it was less haunted. M. de Noère and I took our lunch on the mound of the château itself. Down among the deep weeds in one of its hollows there was still flaunting a brave little purple-velvet petunia, all that was left of Mme. de Thièpvál and her garden, and the prehistoric amenities of life before the war. It seems so odd to realize that in time, I suppose, all this wreck and mess will be tidied up: and this dreadful stage of its existence will become a burked, unmentionable episode in the life of a respectable château, once more clothed and in its right mind, with its ancestral haunts

pressed back underground again where they belong. None the less, I was even gladder the second time than the first to be safe away out of the enveloping horror of the place, and its glaring unwholesome silence under the sun.

6. HOHENZOLLERN REDOUBT

We sauntered away leisurely down the road, with the map, trying to find the Hohenzollern Redoubt, somewhere beyond the village of Thièpval. But village and redoubt and everything are gone back into the green face of the earth. However, having dubiously guessed the village, we at last did succeed in discovering what is left of the redoubt. It is not much — only the usual mound of weeds, a little higher than the shell-humps all about it. Below, in its bowels, we found an unpleasant dug-out, that had evidently been used later on by our own people as a dressing-station. It was a bad place, dark and musty and mildewed, filled with a stench of stale suffering. Blood-stained pads and bandages and mess still trailed about, and the twilight in the corners was populous with obscene toadstools, and there were abandoned tins and bottles to give it the mean, squalid look that you always get in these modern scenes of ruin. Soon I was out again, clambering among the beams and blocks and débris of the upper rooms. And as I explored, there was a flash of grey and white, and out there bolted a cat.

7. THE PUSS

And she was quite a sleek fireside puss, too, plump and soft and specklessly clean. I think that was the worst of it. For she was wild — not mad in the least, but crazed

with shell-shock. She bounded blindly and frantically to and fro, hitting her head cruelly on blocks and beams, before she succeeded in escaping. I do not know why such tiny points do often strike home more intimately than the big ones. It gave me a sharp stab to see that puss still there, and then to think of her home and her hearth and her village blown to nothing round her ears, and her friends all gone away beyond her knowledge, and not so much as one stone left upon another of her comfortable world. If only she had not been so clean and well-liking in her ghastly solitude, perhaps it would not have been so bad. She has seen things that no decent puss should see, and she has grown plump on food that no decent puss should eat. And she is crazy with her memories. When the mind is gone, sleekness and comfortableness of body make a doubling of the horror.

8. THE DEAD TANK

The next tragedy we came to was that of a tank. But she was mercifully dead. She had died horribly, though, in fire: she was all a rusty red as she lay frozen into the moorland, fused solid, with shed limbs and plates of her rollers lying scattered, and her torn guts twisted into knots of agony. She was rather splendid too, more than ever like something out of a geological period. We prowled and explored in her disrupted inside: everything was either welded with fire or shattered into blackened piles and slides of wreckage. It was extraordinarily difficult, seeing her there, so lorn and so lone and so perfectly extinct, to make a picture to one's self of the red hell in which she must have died. And what became of the men who were

inside her? To look at her now, you would not believe that man had ever been within a thousand miles of her, or a hundred thousand centuries.

We still wandered on down the road and browsed once more among the stacked piles of the salvage-dumps. Then we resumed the car, and came bumping into the dip where the Puffing Billies jangle along. There were now a few people on the scene, — Indians clearing up dug-out roofs of corrugated iron for future use, and mending the roads. A little way off a naked Tommy was standing under a spout of water.

9. GLORIA MUNDI

And the beauty of that tiny frail fair thing, vividly white in the sunshine upon that enormous background of emptiness and dun-coloured monotony of moorland was something so enormous in itself, that it went straight through me like a violent lance of pain. So minute a little naked frog, hairless and helpless, to have made the earth such a place of horror, and itself, incidentally, in the making, a thing so infinitely great. Certainly, a lone man, bare as he was born, on a lone landscape bare as it was made, stands out at once as the climax of creation, the most beautiful thing in the world, the most wonderful, the most terrible.

He is supremely pitiful and also supremely august, in his contrast of utter feebleness and immeasurable power, and all the boundless wonder of his endurances and heroisms, bounded physically in that strange, small engine of lusts. For the first time since I came out here I was really seized and shaken by the beauty of the mere mortal body, and

the abominable wickedness of spoiling it. All those complicated bedevilments of iron and dynamite, got together at so vast an expense of thought and money and labour, to destroy just — *that*.

I am glad he came upon me late in the day, and that there was nothing more to see afterward. These sights and their mob of thoughts take so much out of me, and put so much in again, that after a certain point endurance and intelligence fail in sheer fatigue. If only we could get people like the Uncles out here, I think even they would have to realize that this whole horror of the war is so transcendent that its splendour is bound to be even greater still.

10. AMIENS

My own day ended in wholly different scenes and atmospheres, far away down at Amiens. The change is odd and violent, to be in crowded streets again, after the unending vacancies of the Somme. I feel quite Rip-Van-Winklish, and there is a real shock of psychological exaltation about it. It is a hard, businesslike atmosphere, too: it does not ease me back with cordiality into the company of my fellow-creatures. The French of Amiens look a dour folk, but this is good for me. It acts as a bracing corrective to my mind. After the straining emotions of the battlefields I might get melted to sentimentality by a wave of warmth.

Yours

R. F.

IX. KULTUR

Château de Noère

I. PÉRONNE

In Amiens there are no buns nowadays, no *brioches*, no duck-pies any more. Let us make haste to quit the abhorred place. I have seen the very apex of Boche Kultur, and it is worse than even what we have read of it: or, at least, it has become alive to me. You have to go far and far, out across the endless flats of a green, unscarred country, where there are no traces of war. The road is straight and great and Roman. The Emperor Julian may have made it, and the Emperor Napoleon restored it; when you have traversed half the province, you come into Péronne.

There is not one single house in Péronne that the Boche, before he evacuated, did not burn and blow up from within, with patient, thoroughgoing ingenuity, planned for months, in all the steady methodicalness of his organization. It is not a pretty thought: and Péronne is not a pretty place to-day. When first our men rode into it and saw what the Germans had done, it was too much for them. They just cried: even to-day one has to keep tight hold of one's self. It is such a wicked thing to have done, that I found it almost as hard to believe as to bear.

Could even the Uncles see these places and still dare to excuse their murder on any Boche plea of military necessity! Why, even I know better than that, now that I have seen them. The military necessities of war are real things,

of course, hateful and inevitable: they have accounted for Ypres and Arras, all in the fair and square day's work. But Bapaume and Péronne and the rest were never anything at all but little helpless, innocent, open towns. They had not even any military existence — to say nothing of military importance. Nobody has ever seriously dared to excuse their assassination. The plain truth and the facts of the case are too inexorable and obvious. What the Boche could no longer hold for himself, he was determined to make useless for anybody else. And now among those abominable ruins, the human mind can only dully gasp with trying to realize that it is actually other human beings, on the same model as ourselves, who have taken pains and pride and pleasure in such a crime.

But even that was not all they did. Mere destruction is the first declension in the grammar of Boche Kultur. To this day you may not go into any of the houses in Péronne. Not because of chimney-stacks coming down, or walls collapsing every time the wind blows, or floors giving way — no, but because every room in every house is still full of unexploded mines laid by the Boche before he cleared out. From house to house his train-bands went, for weeks previous, salting the whole place with death-traps everywhere. And then he evacuated, and our men came in. And they did not understand the Boche at that time: they thought he was a civilized being. And for that error, they died by dozens in Péronne. Fires were laid in the grate — so hospitable-looking — with explosives under the sticks; explosive buns and sandwiches lay artlessly about, and if you brought a handy chair up to the table, it touched off a mine and blew you to pieces. It was not safe to move a

fern on a window-sill or straighten a picture on the wall. To this day half these dangers continue dormant in the ruins; even the little tin kiosks in the streets are still tied up in barbed wire and out of bounds.

2. HUN HATE

I know you will have read about all this. Perhaps I ought not to waste time telling you, but when one has *seen* what these people can do, — when one has seen it for one's self, — it fills me with a divine anger. Now I know. I had not quite dared to believe before. Atrocities here, atrocities there, I have not troubled you with tales of them. There is always bound to be a miasma of mendacity about them on both sides, and there are certain legends that always emerge at certain periods in all wars. Besides which one allows for wretched men, in a fury of fright or hunger or rage, doing ugly things that they regret as soon as they are calm and warm and fed again. That is war as it has been; but it is not war as perfected by the Boche. What they do in their hot blood, they do not regret: and what they do in cold blood, deliberately, like this, is infinitely worse.

And that is the difference, the final thing that sets the Boche outside the pale of civilization. He does not strangle his wickednesses, as civilized races try to do: he stimulates them. Yet you find people like the Uncles, wanting to pretend that war is so horrible a thing anyhow that all races are equally horrible in the way they wage it; and that it is six of one and half a dozen of the other all round; and that we ourselves should be just as bad as the Boches if we got the chance. It is not true. It is so absolutely not

true that I am left perfectly helpless in front of such a remark.

3. CULTURE *vs.* KULTUR

For the whole point is that even supposing our own men, for instance, of nowadays, did bring themselves to sack a city, they would be doing it *against* their temper and instincts and traditions, and against their officers: nor would they be happy to think about it afterwards. While the German does it on his instincts, inflamed and worked up and deliberately rejoiced in, alike by himself and his officers, before, during, and after. There is all the difference in the world.

The final damnation of the German is this, that his evil does not come from below, it is methodically inspired from above.

4. UNDER ARREST

I had a very practical proof the other day, when I was made a prisoner, of the difference between our own men and officers and the German spirit. This is how it happened. I came on a huge ruined sugar-factory, gutted and blasted, with boilers and tubes like torn gigantic bowels piled up, and two great towers still standing black above the wreck. I strolled across the field, to make a note of it from a conducive angle. From afar this was noted: and Tommies trooped round to detain me in polite chat until an officer should arrive. Suspicion lay heavy on the scene, but everybody continued amiable and affable, and we talked about our different parts of the country, and our native villages, with perfect ease. And then the officer did

arrive, and put questions, and wanted to see papers. In point of fact, my drawing pass had been left in my overcoat pocket across the field, in the car. So thither I had to proceed with my captor, and it would all have been most dramatic, if it had been allowed to be dramatic at all.

So easily, in such circumstances, foreign officers would have been abrupt and cold with a suspect whom it might prove necessary to shoot at any moment — to say nothing of the parade and circumstance with which they would certainly have enveloped the occasion. As it was, we placidly strolled together, in talk of literature and art, to disguise our common consciousness of the fact that close on my heel followed a soldier with bayonet fixed and rifle ready. If I had shown the smallest inclination to bolt, that nice little man — he might have been a gardener in his ordinary walk of life — would no doubt have bowled me over immediately. But whatever had happened, there would have been no ill-feeling or violence about it. And this is so typical of us. Friendliness without formality or fuss up to the last possible moment. We do not need the self-assertion of pomp and officialism. And, if you transport such a scene to Germany in your imagination, you get a measure of the distance between a race that relies on assertion, and a race that relies on its power to do without it.

5. ENGLISH DISCIPLINE

It is the whole atmosphere of our own men that is so exhilarating — such a give-and-take, such an elastic pleasantness all round, without anything cast-iron or official; without arrogance on one side or impertinence on

the other. English discipline seems to be really a trained mutual confidence, with rules laid down to guide behaviour, but no real railing between human beings. It is a pooling of liberties to a common end. And when one has found this, one comes to realize that the Uncles are wholly off the point in their terror of militarism. The militarism that they dread and think is going to develop is nothing but a figment. This discipline is poles asunder from what they mean by militarism: it is even the absolute negation and contradiction of it. It is more like a tremendous game, played harmoniously under a set of rules. And like all games, it annihilates the individual for its own purposes, without in the least annihilating the individuality apart from it. I am terribly near the playing-fields-of-Eton, I know: but because a thing is a *cliché*, it does not unfortunately follow that it is untrue. And, indeed, our secret of departmentalizing life from its earliest stages is the real reason of our elasticity, our power of intelligently obeying without abdicating ourselves. This is the dead opposite of militarism.

6. THE NEGATION OF MILITARISM

What our discipline aims at is keying up a man's intelligence to understand it, while Prussianism — militarism — aims at smashing it down under cast-iron orders. A people which has evolved the former system is not likely ever to dally with the other. We shall leave off this war a great deal more anti-military than when we went into it, I believe: but I believe, too, that what our men will have learnt in the way of restraint and balance will be a precious safeguard in the coming dangers of reconstruction.

Somebody mocked at me the other day, and said I had fallen in love with the citizen army. I suppose it is true. I find it very difficult to judge it gloomily. The more I grow to loathe war and militarism, the more intensely do I admire the new English soldier, for I think he is the ultimate antithesis and destruction of both these evil things. I am not far from proclaiming that his career, as he makes it, is the finest that any man could have. Not in the old sense — of being high-coloured and brutal and “glorious,” but just because it has now become so drab and tedious and detestable. I do not see how it can fail to evoke the very best in him, and to obliterate a great deal of the worst.

A few days later

7. THE NARROWS OF THE ANCRE

This letter has been put by for some days, and I go back with it now to the Somme. This time I did not take the old way by the road out of Albert to Bapaume; instead we went round by Aveluy and up into the valley of the Ancre. It was very lovely indeed: as lovely as peace after all the dreadfulness we had been seeing. At first it is open, level country, quiet and happy, with blue flats of water, and drifts of bright golden willows in their creeks and along their shores. And then you enter the narrows, where the Ancre comes curling down between steep hills on either side, clothed in hanging banks of woodland, as serene and virgin as if it were England. It is like the hanging woods of Bolton or the Wye. There is no war here. Perhaps occasionally some of the big poplars and willows in the water-meadows look rather mangy.

But by degrees the scene changes, and ahead, closing in

the narrow curves of the glen, come into sight the big fells of rolling brown and purple moorland, one behind another. And you gradually realize that the woods are wearing thin, and the poplars in the river-flats grow more and more tattered with every yard. There is a crowded cemetery on the left, and more camps of Indians: dug-outs like hen-coops peer darkly from the bank. On the right a great high down overhangs the dell in a long sweep: this also had woodland on its slopes, but now, though its trees are all intact in the valley bottom itself, they grow quickly raggeder and barer as they ascend, and along the top are nothing but black, bristling spars, bare against the skyline. This is Thièpvål again, frowning down over the curving narrows of the Ancre.

The sight of it makes me realize anew the significance of every one of these insignificant little hills. From the other side Thièpvål is merely the last gentle rise of a wide highland, but from here it impends ominously in a long high curve, and makes you understand what it was worth, and what it stood for, and what it cost. All up the valley, in fact, I continued absorbing the importance of the hills; they are a sinister obsession all round. I feel them as so many giants' castles, each of which in turn the giant-killer had to carry by assault.

And then the comfortable woodland zone ceases altogether: in the valley bottom the stream meanders in runnels and marshes, and the poplars are tattered to death, and here and there is the broken shell of a red-brick house, or some little railway station on this ruined line to nowhere. Down at the junction a side track crosses the railway (you are told to "beware of the trains") and runs

straight across the water-meadow of the Ancre in lengths of planking, before it steeply climbs the long ascent to Thièpvall on the other side.

Here among the runnels, the Indians were enjoying a holiday from their camp across the valley, splashing and spluttering and washing in and out among the flags and sedge and tall, vivid water-weeds. Their dark little bodies seem so paradoxical among the lush Northern green — there is a blistered blackness about their smooth, dull skins against the green as they dip and dive: and they look even smaller and frailer and more helpless against the face of nature than my naked Tommy up on the moor above.

8. BEAUMONT HAMEL

But after that there is no more life, and soon the road slants up on to the void of the fell, and there is nothingness round you everywhere again. Beaumont Hamel lies away off the road, up to the left before you begin climbing. It is not easy to hit on the turning if you do not know it, for it occurs just at the corner of such an enormous salvage-dump — or rather a whole camp of salvage-dumps — that one misses the signpost. However, once embarked on the raw rough road, you find yourself coiling and winding into quite a tight little close glen, as it might be in our own country, the brown fells pressing steeply in on both sides. When I was there the blasting sunshine seemed to reverberate off the slopes, and the dense forest of weeds and poppies quivered in the heat. And it was all so deadly silent. Midday is really more oppressive than dusk in these dead places: the crude brutality of it emphasizes the silence, and strips death of its decent reserve.

For this innocent glade has seen too much: it has been fought over again and again. There is wire everywhere, and mouldering trenches, and dug-outs in rows, even along by the road. Here and there are a few new wooden shanties for the superintendents of the tidyings-up. But they only underline the deadness. One of them, like a raw hen-house, is the palace of the Town Mayor.

The very name sounds like a bad joke, for all the town there is to be mayor of is a wilderness of abandoned rusty wire, with some battered-in dug-outs full of smells and mould. Beaumont Hamel itself lies in the central hollow of the valley, where other dips converge. You know it is there, because the glen widens at this point to receive the others, and you notice that the expanse is filled with a specially wild diversity of humps and bumps, and a special luxuriance of weeds. Otherwise you would not have the slightest idea that there had ever been any place here to have a name — not even when you see another Town Mayor's hen-house by the road, with petunias in pots, and a brave little air of trying to be homely in this valley of dry bones.

Never was there such a crop of weeds. Knee-deep in a frothing sea they hide the amassed mounds which are all that is left of Beaumont Hamel. Some of them, chicory and mallow, are in such sweeps of jungle that they make a broad pale blur of blue or lilac from across the other side of the hollow. But in the village itself the rankness is often of gardens gone wild — blasted, dumpy pear trees returning to life outside what may have been the parsonage: and hop-tangles and flopping mountains of wistaria, from which their porches and arches and summer houses

and gazeboes have fallen away into an oblivion as complete as Nineveh or Babylon. All this jungle makes the going very bad among these hills. The hills themselves, in point of fact, are tolerably bare, but the dips in between are pot-holes veiled in weeds. You have to be very careful. Beaumont Hamel has not yet been tidied up, and there is no telling what or who may not still be lying *perdu*. Or there may be a big hole or gaping cellar under the smooth uniformity of a sheet of couch-grass. And there is always the chance of tactlessly treading on a Mills grenade. The ground is full of them, and sometimes one sees them and sometimes one does not. When you do see them, peering out of the soil precisely where you were going to put your foot, you dislike them vividly — evil little black gourds of iron, as big as a baby's fist and full of death. But when you don't see them, you dislike them even more. And in such places you do not linger. Five seconds is no long notice.

9. THE BOCHE CEMETERY

Up behind the hummocks of the village there is a strange precinct, close under the hollowed scarp of the hill that overhangs it. It is a dim, blurred sort of enclosure, and has an ambitious chapel-apse in ruins, and a large pagan-looking altar, and rows and rows of wooden crosses rather larger and lower than usual; and the whole scene is submerged in a neck-high ocean of Michaelmas daisies that make one solid, sheeting flare of purple and crimson among the dull browns and greens and russets of the rest. I wonder if those asters were deliberately sent for from Erfurt or Stuttgart, or whether they were merely quarried from the ruined gardens of the village?

For gradually the mystery of the place unravels. On the altar there are eagles in relief, and a half-achieved inscription — in German: and there are German memorial tablets on the wall of the apse, and all the names on the crosses are German. It is a cemetery of Boche dead. And they hoped it would be eternal, and they were building a *denkmaal* chapel, and they were putting up a pompous white-eagled monument in the most typical Boche-Moloch style of would-be grandiose brutality. And then, even before they had finished their job, came the end of their eternity; and the Allies' shell-fire blew all the living of them from the place, and made a wreck of all these advertisements of the dead. It is already a presumption that they should still be lying in the soil of France. But I must confess that I thrilled with a touch of savage Hebrew joy, like Jeremiah's, over this avenging red wind that has so utterly scattered their names and their tablets, and their uncompleted memorial, and all their insolent pomps with which they had hoped to prove and proclaim the permanence of their rule here. Yes, and I dug up the reddest of those asters, and sent it home for a relic!

10. THE BOCHE DUG-OUTS

The dead are beyond one's angers, though: *they* have paid their bill, for the time being. It is the defeated arrogance of the living that one triumphs over here. It is an evil place, this cemetery, breathless and baking in the sunlight. But even more evil are the excavated Boche habitations up under the scarp immediately behind. Everything here is still exactly as it was: not a grenade, not a rag, not a single disgusting old fragment

has yet been moved. Up behind the cemetery you pass, over wire, into a line of deep dug-outs all along beneath the front of the hill. It is grisly work exploring them. They are the most elaborate constructions, all lined and baulked with wood, with wooden staircases: you go down, down, down in the blank dark, until either you feel you do not want to go any farther or you cannot. Sometimes they end in collapse, and sometimes their slimy depths seem to continue indefinitely, and you peer doubtfully forward into cellar after cellar dimly looming away into blackness. At one end of the row they all lean drunkenly to the left, roof and props and walls unanimously, and look like falling in at any moment. For on the hill above a famous mine was sprung, and this is how it thrilled the solid flanks of earth even half a mile or more away.

But those abandoned dug-outs are certainly not comfortable. I am never quite sure enough that they really are as abandoned as I should wish. Their atmosphere is moist and clammy, dank and dankly stinking. I go in a perpetual creep, under the oppression of many evil possibilities. And each time I emerge, the wholesome daylight is like clean wine.

It is even an added dreadfulness to see how well they are built, with such a lavish suggestion of permanence — the neat staircases, the cupboards and fire-places in the walls, the bottle-shelves, the beds. And now, all mouldy and mildewed, sprouting everywhere with filth-coloured fungi, that nestle to the walls in the twilight like cakes of cancerous brain or liver. And the place is full of bloated flies that buzz. Their noise is the nastiest note of all in that haunted silence: you never know what you are going

to come on next in the murk. The cupboards, indeed, are bare, and the beds stripped and abandoned, but traces of occupation still trail all over the place in a sodden cag-mag of decay — suggestive and evil in the half-light. In the entrance of one, for instance, I came on a curé's rusty black soutane, lying in a crumpled wet mess. It was a forlorn object: it had odd cuts and stains on it: I did not at all like it, as I poked it gingerly under the weight of that hot, steamy stillness, broken only by the drone of the flies.

II. SIC TRANSIT GLORIA

And then I picked my way down in the dark of a slippery stairway, and round into a set of chambers more elaborate than the rest. Here there were yet more odds and ends of equipment and clothing, swept into corners of the room. And the flies buzzed more insistently than ever, and there was a curious hollow smell pervading. I had just found the wreckage of a sandbag, too, piled in an angle of the wall: and was meditating anew on its unpleasant resemblance to what one imagines of a dead body in débris — when I realized that I had made a mistake. Exactly like a broken sandbag, indeed, — but here was the poor mummified forearm, dried into an ash-coloured cylinder, with other fragments of greyish white, and all the miserable scrapped machinery of man. And now so very small and insignificant, neatly stacked in a humble little pile against the wall. But I did not stop to verify him any further.

And I visited the other dug-outs after that with an extra precautionsness — not owing only to the live grenades and dead rags that lay about everywhere in the gloom. Round

every corner of their pompously cemented entrance walls I expected unpleasantnesses to peer: on one of them a big iron ball had been stuck for ornament, like a stone ball on the end of a terrace balustrade. And inside it was like the Hohenzollern Redoubt; there was hospital wreckage of a later occupation than the German — bottles, tins, pads, rags, sodden and slimy in the dark, with an extra-luxuriant growth of toadstools, and an extra luxuriance of moist chill smells. You saw where the beds had been. But perhaps it is worse now than it was then. One does not like it now, anyhow: it's no place to stay in by yourself. Souls or no souls, high futures or no high futures, what possesses me absolutely here is the miserable hatefulness of physical pain, and the beauty of the mere mortal body having to be plastered and sewn and bandaged and splinted.

I was not sorry to be done with those dug-outs, and up through the briars and brambles and barbed wire of the little scarp behind, out on to the open moorland above. Still one has to go carefully, because of the casual grenades and old lurking lengths of wire. Indeed, that particular upland of moor is rather specially difficult, being a wild labyrinth of crumbling trenches and shell-holes and derelict snarls of wire, with deep growths of weed in hollows and holes. We went in search of the mine-crater. There it was, away to the right in a dimpled whitish ruffle along the sky-line. But it took us a long time to get there, swinking and sweating in streams under the sun. And as we drew near there was movement over the vacancy, like a constant *va-et-vient* of little black ants. I thought at once of the tiny ants who scavenge over the skull of the dead Boche on the Butte.

12. THE BEATERS

For here were the small Indians scavenging in just the same unresting and apparently motiveless activities, gathering their spoil and carrying it down to the dumps, in long processions cheered by melancholy chantings. One lot was out for smaller fry. Each man carried a basket, and a whole broad line of them extended across the face of the moor, just like beaters at home, except that they were closer together. But exactly like beaters do they advance over the landscape at you, beating up every tussock and tuffet as they come. It is an uncanny sight. Nowadays the game they flush is most inanimate — an old rifle, a helmet, cartridge-belt, or oddment of gas-bag. But sometimes, even to-day, there are other things. While we were there, they came on what had once been a Boche. It was carefully collected out of the weeds and carried down into the valley, and there put permanently to rest in the cemetery up away from the track which has received all the bodies and human fragments from Beaumont Hamel.

13. THE CRATER

As for the crater, this is not abruptly deep and blankly bare, like the one at Pozières. It is much more vast and wide, like a young pot-hole under Simonstone, with shallow ravinated declivities, descending at one end in leprous-looking white heaves to the broad mud-flats at the bottom, which are set here and there with wreckage and half-buried tangles of wire, standing up from the slough like bogged carcasses. Down on this side gradually stretches this gaunt waste of mamelons, scurfy with

blasted weeds, like some unwholesome slag-dump or burnt volcanic scorix: on the other the walls fall much more steeply to the mud-flat, and are clothed all over in red and rust-coloured wreckage that gives more than ever the look of the rust-coloured moorland slopes that descend to the lip of a pot-hole. And the flanks and falls of the hole are still encrusted with débris, of shells and splinters, duds and shrapnel. Of the men who went up in all those tons there is hardly anything left, of course, but now and then you may come on a small flake of yellowed bone among the flints and the shards, and the crumbled whiteness of the chalk.

14. PLANES

And so at last we rolled away, over the hills and over the hills. Aeroplanes, as usual, buzzed and droned in the clear sky, almost too far up for eye-reach, despite their noise, which, like a tiger's purr, seems to come from everywhere at once, and not to give any guidance as to whether they are flying high or low. One cannot always be noticing them, because they are always there. Yet they never become stale; never does one hear their great pervasive hoon without immediately craning or rising to see where they are. Do you remember how soon we all got accustomed to motors, and never looked twice at them again? But the conquest of the air seems much more intimately to violate our ancestral sense of the probable and the proper.

15. PUYSIEUX AND BUCQUOI

The rest of the day was a sordid relief and *détente*. For at last the blankness of the moor gave place to the

uglier, homelier desolation of villages, and of villages not annihilated but merely shattered. Puysieux and Bucquoi have had shell-fire concentrated on their houses alone: so that they stand wrecked with their woods still intact all round them in masses of heavy green. The contrast seems to add a strangely disgusting note to this doll's-house mess of tawdry modern life. In a way it is more striking than complete destructions like Sailly or Fricourt. Modern life seems to leave only a squalid, ugly ruin. I dare say mediæval life did, too, but one only sees it now transfigured and dignified by distance. Anyhow, in places like these, Tragedy is a rusty-bonneted charwoman, not a buskined Muse. These smashed red-brick shops and villas, their twisted gates and verandahs and railings, their piled moraines of "ornamental" tiles, the litter of prescriptions and broken bottles in what was once the chemist's shop — it is all somehow merely ugly, without any of the dignity that even ugliness sometimes has.

Perhaps I am merely tired with what I have seen, but I cannot at present get up — the very word gives me away — any great feeling for the ruined life of places like these. It had a right not to be ruined, yes: and its ruin is hard lines on its inhabitants, yes: but it smells to me as if this had been a gew-gawdy, garish life, cheap and shallow and material, over whose destruction one really need not wring the depth of one's heart for tears. Yet I suppose all this deficiency in me is mere snobbishness, because these houses were so obviously smug and complacent and middle-class in their ugliness. Anyhow, I did do my best to behave suitably. While M. de Noère was prospecting for relics, I prowled my way into a ruined courtyard: and there in the

midst was a mound, a monument, and a wooden cross. I determined at once that there must be no more nonsense about being tired, and that I *would* feel the proper emotions. So with reverent awe, and tears ready to the tap, I approached this unknown hero's grave. The name upon that cross was merely—"Urinal."

Yours

R. F.

P. S. I have been again at Beaumont Hamel, while this letter has been lying unposted. And now the little Indians have come there and tidied it up, and the whole atmosphere is quite altered and cleared and ordinary. It shows how much depends on having the luck to see these places before the right moment has passed.

X. THE FRONT LINE

Château de Noère

I. THE APPROACH

More and more links get added to the chain. I am learning so much and so quickly out here that I grow rapidly to feel as stupid as a pudding. Incidentally I have been in the front-line trenches, and within fifteen yards of the Boche. ("Did you talk to any of them?" is what Aunt Bethia will immediately ask.) I cannot tell you where, of course: but there is just this one point along the whole front where intruders are sometimes by special favour permitted. You may judge that it is not particularly active: I really cannot expect to have tame battles arranged for me, as if I were Xerxes at Salamis or a potential President of the United States. Even as it is, one goes very humbly along, round-shouldered with apology, feeling that one must be a graceless nuisance and offence to the real people. However, we are told — and I am going to make a point of believing it — that they rather like these visitations, as bringing change and "a little quiet cheerfulness" into their monotony.

Anyhow, see us alighting at one end of a ruined village, red and raw, that squatters along a dip on what seems the last verge of the world. At the far end, away beyond, there rises the long hog's-back of a fell, more than ever like the uppermost rise of a grouse-moor, but scarred with feeble whitish scrawls that are our rearmost trenches. And over the hill is the enemy. It's a miserable walk up and down the

main street of that gutted, smashed place. It is still open to Boche fire, too, and you have to have your helmet on, and your nosebag hitched up close and ready under your chin. At the other end of the street the road sinks into the shallow, and away to the left its gentle rise lies open right out into Boche-land: while in front you immediately have to take to the communicating trench that cuts across the level and leads you up on to the moor. It would not do to cross that space frankly in the open, screens or no screens. It seems so perfectly ludicrous that there should be perils about in a scene so empty and smiling and peaceful, but we had already had a reminder.

2. CASUALTIES

As we came up the village street there met us a casualty, stumbling dully along to a dressing-station on the arm of an ambulance-man. He had been working somewhere out on the fell, I suppose, and the tin hat had been a nuisance. So he had slung it off, as a soldier invariably does if he possibly can. And then, of course, there came the inevitable bit of shrapnel and chipped him in the skull. He was a handsome, stolid, red-cheeked country lad: and he was not badly hurt. But the expression in his eyes was a bovine surprise. I think the omnipresence of Death at the front provokes a certain fatalistic, generalized familiarity: but about an actual wound when it comes, civilized man cannot help feeling a certain aggrieved amazement. It seems so odd, so illegal and gratuitous, that other people, also presumably civilized, should be deliberately letting off destruction in your direction. I'm sure if a shell should come bursting anywhere near me, I should

instinctively look round for the police — I do wonder, though, what one really would feel?

3. THE TRENCHES

Sweating beneath our helmets and bags we proceeded along and along in the tortuous depths of the trenches. You know all about these. They are beautifully built and clean, in the clean whiteness of the chalk, and their duck-walks make the going easy. (What they must have been like in wet weather, though, before somebody invented this sequence of flat-runged ladders laid end to end above their bottom, "is a thing that beggars language, Julia.") But their blind labyrinths are so baffling that one gets dazed and stunned and stupid. One just goes on, in an *accelerando* of helplessness, like a squirrel on its treadmill. You cannot see out or over, of course: you lose all sense of direction — especially as no trench ever goes straight for more than a few yards. They zigzag through the ground in crazy machicolations, so as to minimize the damage of concussion, in case of a shell-burst. All intelligence and observation go to pieces in their viewless mazes: and all emotion goes too. You become merely a mechanism. And there is never any Ariadne with a ball of wool. How even the most practiced manage to keep their way I cannot conceive: in fact, I have noticed that they very often don't — in spite of the little wooden signposts at the various divergencies, indicating "Annie's Walk," or "Evelyn's Way," or "Kate's Cut."

4. THE QUARRY

But at last we did come out into a chalk-pit under the lee of the hill. And there were hundreds of ruddy

Tommies sitting about and eating the most savoury-smelling lunch of pork and beans. It was piping hot, too, brought up the trenches in huge black thermos chests. Altogether you certainly never saw a haler, heartier, better-cared-for looking lot of fellows in your life. Evidently there could not possibly be a more salubrious existence than this of the trenches — until you are in actual process of being killed. As you see these well-liking, pink people sitting about and gutting their tins, it seems more like a successful health-cure than anything else, a *Lufkurort*.

You hear the shells booming and bursting up and about: and it wants all the imagination one has got, to grip the fact that up there there are also men like these, and that they will come down here in due time, and these go up to take their turn. But even in the quarry you might get a shell. It is in comparative security, of course: but there is rather more comparative than security in the matter. Yet the consciousness does not trouble anybody: they are all hardened and steeled to the infinite possibilities of the inevitable.

5. THE RADIANT LIFE

In fact, what I myself am most livelily conscious of here is not the chance of death, but the radiance of life. All this business — it may be tedious and uncomfortable and dangerous and ultimately horrible: but none the less, many of these fellows are having a far better life all round than they ever had before, looked after and kept warm and fed and comfortable as circumstances allow, with an infinite elaborateness of organization and machinery. Every individual counts, even though he may some day have to be

thrown away in the mass. And a very large proportion of them were no doubt the rat-population of the big towns before the war, unfed, unhoused, uncared-for in any way. Even those who come from the higher layers are getting care and comfort far more than they would ever have dreamed of achieving for themselves at home, and without any effort or worry of their own. Not that this, for a moment, minimizes our debt to them, but what it does do is enormously to complicate the problem of getting them all home again. Having tasted better things, are they going to return placidly to the former condition of things — even if the former condition of things were still open to receive them?

6. TOMMY

They are a very wonderful folk, in all their complicated simplicity. I feel it almost an impertinence to talk to them — as if they might justly resent it. (As for interviewing them and pelting them with questions, this is, it seems to me, a rank impertinence — to say nothing of the fact that asking questions is the very last way in the world to get real answers.) But mercifully the people who do the wonderful things in life are never in the least conscious how wonderful they are. I suppose to sit at home like the Uncles, crystallized in contempt for mere soldiers, everything that these lads are doing is just in their day's work, dinner and death and all. And so it is to them, no more and no less. But to any one who even begins to appreciate the marvellousness of man, there is a stolid grandeur about this attitude — it is not an attitude at all, in fact: it is a philosophy — that ought to make the rest of the world feel

humble in their armchairs. And through it all these fellows only grumble and laugh. If they did not do both, they could not go on. It is our laughter that is winning the war.

7. THE NEW HUMOUR

Have you noticed that every big new military upheaval in history has had to have a new root-impulse to heave it up? Devotion was the mine that exploded the early crusades, and Napoleon's armies were the children of the Revolution, and it was a concentration of piety that precipitated our own New Model against the Stuarts. If it were not the child of an idea, no new movement could either be born or develop. Nowadays it is the Sense of Humour that is the Holy Spirit of our new New Model. It is just as much a passion as the piety of the Puritan, and just as much a necessity. But it is much harder to define.

It is really, perhaps, our intense national seriousness turned inside out. It is essentially a facing of realities. The French and the Americans do not understand it at all. To the hard seriousness of the one we seem merely frivolous; to the simple, single-eyed Puritanism of the other, incomprehensible scoffers without feeling. Whereas in point of fact it is only because we are so acutely and self-consciously emotional that we have had to invent laughter for our shield. Otherwise, if we once began to give way, we should be swept off our feet by our feelings, and be perpetually in floods of tears again, as we were in the days of Henry VIII. It was Charles II who was the first of modern Englishmen.

The Sense of Humour, in fact, is our self-consciousness turned to scorn by ourselves. And it is not in the least degree sunny and genial. It is a twisted, dour thing, as hard

as the pietism of the Puritan that went before it. Laughter is only a by-product in it. But it is the inspiration that carries us all through — a sense of the grotesque and absurd about the juxtaposition of ourselves and our surroundings. The dogged grin of the New Soldier comes out of his sense of the whole business as being a gigantic bad-form joke, that he, being what he is, should be where he is. It is simply out of arrogance, out of decency, out of courage, out of sheer self-protection, that the Englishman “grins and bears it.”

Really our new laughter is simply another aspect of our grousing. “Are we down-hearted — *Yes!*” crystallizes the entire attitude in a phrase; a joke is a grumble and a grumble is a joke, and either or both are symbols of a determination that only heightens with the intensity of the grumbling or the bitingness of the joke. But no wonder the simpler nations are puzzled and *déroutés* by our self-defensive mask: they think that calm means indifference, and reserve coldness, and a joke irreverence; so do our own Victorians, round-eyed, honest folk, without the ghost of a twinkle, who associate humour with laughter. Whereas it is really a child of pain, begotten on Prometheus by the eagle.

The point was fixed for me one day by a talk between two soldiers, English and American. The American was looking forward to the next war, and telling us all about what he meant to do when it happened. “Ah,” said the other fellow, quite quietly, — he was corseted in ribbons of honour, I may say, and trailed half the alphabet in clouds of glory after his name, — “Ah, when the next war happens, *I’m* going into the Church.” I do not think the American understood in the least. He stood there open-

mouthed and stricken. And then, with conscious kindness, began a new subject. Yes, and so would Aunt Bethia, in just the same uncomprehending amazement. Englishmen will lose half their power if ever the world comes at all to understand that the intention he announces always varies inversely with the intention he really holds. The greater his purpose, the lightlier he talks; the heavier the stress, the lightlier it is borne. So that I see the modern Englishman as something tragically grand and Greek — a titanic figure, laughing out against the dark — a Prometheus, rewritten by Euripides, and translated by W. W. Jacobs.

8. THE FRONT LINE

Anyhow, here were all these people doing their various chores up and down the trenches. For by this time, you may well believe that we were out of the quarry, and on our forward way again towards the front line, up over the brow of the hill. More labyrinthine ins and outs and alongs: men standing by, or carrying things, or dozing or writing letters in cavernous, dark coops excavated in the side of the trench. And all this within a hundred yards of the Boche, with his shells whimpering and thudding the whole time. Two of them had just burst at a junction of the trenches before we arrived there, but otherwise they seemed fantastic accidents, in the heavy Sabbatical stillness.

And this deepened upon us and deepened as we went, till we were actually within a stone's throw of the Boche himself — in the very front-line trench, with a handy periscope through which one might look at him, barely fifteen yards beyond. (No, dear Aunt Bethia, one *does not* talk to him: nor does one even see him.) On the contrary, one

goes along quite particularly cautiously and creep-mouse at this point, for fear any unusual noise should provoke his fire. Obviously this might be very vexing for one's self, but it would be far worse, and quite unpardonable, to do anything that might endanger the soldiers standing about, or the people who are taking one round. Accordingly, in a breathless hush we proceeded, with our heads kept well down, as decency as well as prudence bade. It is not so long since a correspondent stuck a red flower in his tin hat, and then peered over the top of the trench: with the result that he was immediately shot through the skull. This has tended to make obtrusiveness unfashionable among visitors. And it was the oddest experience: the most dream-like and unactual. Up on to the firing-step I mounted and peered through. And what I saw before me was a wide, leisurely vacant landscape of autumn moorland, quivering in the leaden September heat, completely void of any sound or sight or suggestion of life. There was our own barbed wire, just in front of us, rusty among the dreary thistles: and then, beyond that, more. That was all. One felt like strolling gently out on to the fell to pick flowers. Or we could all have gone out and lain on the grass in a circle and chatted, till the next drive was ready. It seemed quite unthinkable that there was another trench over there a few yards away, just like our own, and filled with other people more or less like one's self: and that everybody on either side was on the alert to kill, if so much as a finger waved. Not even the shells made that brooding watchfulness more easy to grasp: they only made it more grotesque. For everything was so paralyzed in calm, so unnaturally innocent and bland and balmy. You simply could not

take it in. Yet day and night the watchful monotony at this point is never broken, unless shell or shrapnel come bursting in, or there happens the relaxation of a raid. And when you learn that each set of men is only kept up here in the actual front for six days or so at a stretch, you begin to get a faint idea of what the strain must be in livelier, deadlier sectors.

9. THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH

We returned at last to headquarters, above the quarry, and then went down vertiginously into the very blackness of the pit. And there, hundreds of feet underground as it seemed, we found a ramification of cool, high caverns, stately quarried and appointed, where all the staff, like conies, had their secure habitation, from grotto to grotto, down out of reach of even the heaviest Boche bombardment. And the beauty of it is that these caves and cellars are of Boche workmanship. For this was one of their choicest and most elaborate systems of excavations: it is with a doubled thrill of joy that one finds them now giving comfort and sure harbour to our own men, with honest whiskey in their cupboards, and Kirchner's lovelinesses willowing on their walls.

10. BAPAUME

After which we did at length get away, and down the blazing bowels of the trenches once more, till we reached the ruined village, and ultimately the car. Having fed, I once more became capable of taking notice, and we proceeded away to Bapaume. But it is an odd thing that even so, and for all the many times I have gone through it,

Bapaume still remains to me "one of those people whose faces, once seen, are never remembered." Though I have been there often enough, in fact, it never arrives at having a face for me at all. It is just a blur, an ugly little broken town without particular features or individuality. Yet one ought not to be so stupid. The murder of Bapaume was as frigid and motiveless and vile as that of Péronne. But the truth is that in time one grows stunned and dulled to even the worst of ruins. It is another debt we owe the Boches, this developing feeling of blaséness and bluntedness over wholesale scenes of wretchedness like this, which a few weeks ago would have kept one simmering in nightmares.

But perhaps, again, I was only tired. Anyhow, I shall keep this letter hanging, to give it a chance of perking up.

(A few days later)

And I am very glad I did keep it hanging. For a wonderful thing has happened, and I have had my heart's desire, and learned what it is like. Of course, it is ridiculous and absurd to talk about it, even: you must promise never to let any of the real people know that I have done so. But to me it was more than an episode, it was an event.

II. THE BLACK COUNTRY

It was into quite a new country that we went yesterday. It began by being, as usual, ups and downs of corn and pasture and woodland, serene and smiling. But halfway along it changed, and grew flatter and wider and barer; and in due course it became a vast, vast flat as far as eye could see, all mine-heads and red houses, with slag-dumps towering up in pale-blue pyramids away and away

to the horizon. Except that it seemed clean and tidy in the sunlight, it might have been our own Black Country: it was the beginning of the almost endless coal-field that ranges up through Belgium.

In the towns there were fairs going on as if nothing were happening. And in some of the villages there was actually rebuilding, and even new building — a sight as rare as white swallows within so short a distance of the front. Not that there was anything worse, here, than an occasional house with a shell-burst in it. But it was wonderful to see how unperturbedly the population was still carrying on: every place was crowded — by native French, as well as by our own people, in training everywhere. At one point they were doing bayonet practice, and we stopped to look.

12. BAYONET PRACTICE

All over the country you get these grisly race-courses, but this was the only time I ever saw one in use. Usually what you see is only a long, lonely gallows in a far corner of some field, with rows of what look like fat dead bodies, torn and ragged and bursting. They hang there quite forlorn and desolate, in rain and shine, and nobody goes near them any more. So that they give you a very good idea of what England must have been like when the landscape used to be diversified with people hanging in chains. But the actual practice is much more vivid than those ghostly reminiscences.

There the bodies hang, plump and well-liking, from a gallows like a football goal: and at the other goal a dozen men are lying on their bellies over the rampart of a trench, with bayonets fixed. And then, on the command, out they

all jump as simultaneously as they can manage, and run to pig-stick the pendent bodies with as much enthusiasm as they can muster, uttering yells as ferocious as they can achieve. It looks a quite unreal and childish make-believe, and yet it has to become a dreadful reality. Of course, in practising decent, kindly fellows to such a business as this, you must not be surprised if at first the yells are dutiful rather than convincing, and the charge a little lacking in *élan*. In time practice makes perfect, and hot blood helps out the yells that are not so easy to make terrific in cold.

Chinese psychology is perfectly sound on this point, as on all others: and bayonet practice is our practical apology for having so long laughed at the hideous faces and yowlings with which a Chinese army used to prance against the foe. In personal fighting there are two main points: to daunt the enemy and inspire yourself. The yell does both. Until a civilized being has howling-dervished himself into baresarkness, how can he bring his nerve to such an uncivilized horror as running a bayonet through another man's bowels? But the passion feeds the yell, and the yell feeds the passion. And here you have the passion being rehearsed in cold blood. The blackest of all debts we owe the Boche is that he has forced the whole world to compete with him in a steady *crescendo* of horrors like this, and worse. It is a debasing, all round, of the moral currency that we had most of us been so elaborately purifying for generations and standardizing with conventions and conferences and safeguards. He has lost us, in four years, the upward effort of a thousand.

13. PRECAUTIONS

The landscape becomes more and more Black Country as you go farther. M. de Noère discovered a headquarters embowered deep in a wood, and won permission for the cars to go right on down the road to the front. It is not a popular thing, as a rule, to take cars near the front in fine weather, because the clouds of dust they raise may draw the enemy's fire on the forces. Two or three big cars, too, on an open road are very visible from above, if there should be a Boche plane about. And, of course, he cannot know whether they contain kings and queens, or merely lesser mortals. But naturally he will take no risk of missing an opportunity: down to his batteries goes a wireless message, and they will probably set to work at once looking for those cars with shells, on the chance of their containing big game.

However, in our own case, we were not allowed to test the safety of the road to the front. We reached at last a broken red-brick mining town on a railway, with silenced pitheads standing over it, gaunt and black; and here, at the level crossing, we were stopped by a sentry, to whom the permission of headquarters was nothing. It appeared that we had already courted remark by coming even so far down the broad, straight stretch of white road behind the town: and "no farther on any account" was the word.

Accordingly we alighted, and retired up a side-track to eat lunch in a goods-shed with its roof riddled with bullets and shrapnel. It was part of the railway yard, and across the lines rose a ruined manufactory, with a torn piece of zinc roofing that creaked and wailed to and fro, and

clanged on the wall. There was no other sign of life in the place, until we found that in the little street there was still a shop with a brave small Belgian lady presiding over it, undeterred by the constant spasmodic shellings. We had a chat with her. She was a cheery soul: but she had none of Aunt Bethia's tenderness for the Boche.

14. SHELLED

So, having heard her tale, we rounded the corner, and proceeded straight ahead out of the town up the wide highway that rises gently towards the sky-line of the fell (on the other side of which I hoped, as always, to see all manner of marvels). And hardly had we started than I was dimly aware of a querulous faint wail passing by overhead in a sweet and malign vibration of sound. I vaguely looked about, and, in the instant, behind me, at the corner of the street, not fifty yards away, broke out a dull, dry thud, and a dirt-coloured cloud of smoke and dust.

A rudderless uncertainty possessed me, as I stood there. More wailings, more shells flying over; and more, on to the spot where we had been standing not three minutes earlier. I did not like it at all: and yet my dominant feeling was a bewilderment. There was obviously no use running anywhere, and nowhere particular to run to: so one stayed on the spot. And, of course, though it is ridiculous to compare a little, isolated, insignificant occasion like this, with the real shelling that the real people undergo, yet in a way it did show me how one is bound to develop a certain fatalistic helplessness. Just as we keep our feet by virtue of air-pressure all round, so I suppose we stop where we are largely by dint of the danger-pressure all round.

Nothing you can do will make the smallest possible difference. This is a great help towards a pessimistic acquiescence. So long as one can take a hand in fate, it is allowable to fuss: but when it becomes a matter of confronting the incalculable and the inevitable, then you simply stay quiet and take things as they come, if only because there is no use doing anything else.

At the same time, it is absurd to pretend that one can enjoy being shelled. The quavering squeal of the things as they go by is not pleasant, and it is no very lively consolation to learn that the shell you don't hear is the only shell that kills you. At the same time, as I say, one is not exactly or actively afraid. The intrusion of danger into life seems rude and unexpected, rather than anything else. I suppose the fear of death is the correlative of the desire to live, without which life itself could not be possible. Yet it is really not so much a fear of death, as an instinctive dislike for the process. I wonder if complete powerlessness mitigates the terror, or intensifies it. I expect, as long as there remains a chance, one might perhaps go desperate, but when the whole thing is a mere toss-up, then probably one's mind, like one's body, takes refuge in luck and *laissez-faire*.

15. ALL ABOUT IT

After all, nothing of it greatly matters. That is certainly a thing I got hold of from my own minute experience — I mean a real, vivid sense of how perfectly unimportant one's own existence is. Of course, one had said so (and honestly thought one thought so) for years: but that had always really been only a cold, academic conviction.

The bursting of shells near you drives the truth home in a very new way. It comes as an extraordinarily vivid flash of illumination. It is as if, quite suddenly, shutters broke open, and you saw things as they are, in a burst of genuine exhilaration and freedom. It is an odd, glorious, gusty wind of freedom to come out into, after a domestic English atmosphere for ever occupied with the importance of going on individually surviving, where, if Aunt Bethia's arm-chair skids, it is something to talk about for weeks.

I did not, of course, pursue these meditations on the spot; though I did take hold of myself deliberately to try and find out, honestly, what it was I did and did not feel. But the shelling continued, and it seemed advisable to become less conspicuous than we were on the highroad. And the more we feared, the less we said, about the chauffeurs in charge of the two cars, close to that fatal corner. M. de Noère went back to enquire, leaving us reluctant under orders to stay where we were. For, by that time, we had taken shelter in the broken husk of a small red-brick villa by the roadside, and stood trepidating among the nettles in the parlour. Peering out was discouraged by the fact that immediately overhead, microscopic in the heavens, there hovered a Boche plane. That he had, no doubt, taken us for kings and queens was an inspiring thought, but the honour had its inconveniences, especially as the shell-search went on indefatigably, in the hope of catching us.

In due time, though, M. de Noère returned, with reassuring news of the drivers and the little Belgian lady: all of whom had apparently taken the matter in the very best spirit, as an enlivening incident in the day. I wondered what we were to do next. Obviously the most sensible as well as

the most rewarding thing would be to go on going straight forward up the road. Thus we should be going farther away from the shells, and farther towards the horizon over which I so much wanted to see. This we accordingly did. Looking up under the brim of our tin hats we saw that the sky was now empty again, so forth we fared. But it was not thought advisable to make ourselves obvious on the road, so we scattered to either side of it; and then, with long intervals between us, advanced up the fallow fields, picking our way among the wire and weeds. One felt very dramatic — like playing at Red Indians on the prowl.

Still the shells came crooning over, bursting far behind us now, into the town and the purple-coloured desert flats of country beyond it, where our front line ran. I could not rise to the heights of a fellow-sufferer who wanted to suppose that this was "what they call continuous fire." It was not: there were about three shells coming over in the minute. But they were quite enough. However, by this time my own feeling of baffled unimportance had really towered into a quite definite and not by any means unpleasant excitement — so that I felt exaggeration might be excused to other pictorial minds. Personally, though, I prefer penny plain to tuppence coloured. It gets its effect better — to say nothing of the truth. The only other symptom that I myself have to record was that I felt that same curious, faint, fibrillar tremor that I had had in London during a big air-raid. An odd thing, nothing to do with shiverings or quakings or clatterings of teeth: — just a very tiny vibration, as it were *inside* one's nerves and muscles, and yet outside one's self — not affecting anything.

16. THE FINAL SYMPTOM

We never got to my horizon after all. On we trudged, and on and on, up beside that endless straight road. At first it had rare ruins of houses here and there along the edge, which one could glorify as points of shelter, whence to go venturously forward again. But these tailed off bit by bit, and there was nothing except desert moorland, up ahead to the sky-line. Still, scattered and singly we advanced in the grass; it was full of barbed wire and other impediments. But we were looking for some battalion or other, and at last we came to a trench and diverged down it. And under the lifeless face of the earth we came into a pulsing vein of humanity again, there, where superficially nothing was visible but void desolation. As usual, they took endless trouble for us, and guided us this way and that in the white mazes. But where our battalion had gone I shall never know: anyhow, we could not find it, and so returned to the cars. And as we coursed through the golden afternoon with shrapnel clattering paradoxically aloft in the blue, I felt the same secondary symptom that had followed my experience of the London air-raid. For now again my spirits towered and swelled inexplicably into a huge general serenity of exultation with everything and everybody. All was for the best in this most radiant of possible worlds.

Yours

R. F.

XI. LENS AND VIMY

Château de Noère

I. THE PERSONAL ELEMENT

It is a depressing thing to realize that no human being can ever say what really is: he can only say what he himself thinks is. And what he thinks, is so sadly liable to be what he wants to think. One's own hopes and fears and desires and personality are spectacles one cannot strip off, whether they vitiate one's eyesight or clarify it.

Take two ordinary Tommies coming down the lane. The Uncles would see them only as a brutal and besotted soldiery, — or, at best, as no-account creatures who drop their aitches, — not interesting or notable in any way. And when I see them — it is the Immortality of the Soul, and the Vision of the Future, and the Glory of England, and the Marvellousness of Man, and the Great Renunciation, and the Great Attainment, — a whole nebula of capital letters. And they are just two ordinary Tommies all the time. — Yes, but what is that? And what is there that is ordinary in the world?

Perhaps I am having a reaction now, after that adventure. But more likely I am a little blued over with the thought of going away. And I cannot see the future after this at all. It is a void like death. In a way, I feel that this has been the real thing, and that now I am to go plunging forward again into the turbid chaos of clouds in which I floundered before. However, I daresay it is nonsense. For

the things ahead always become tolerable as soon as they are not ahead any longer.

2. SAINT-ÉLOI

And, of course, the things I see rise and rise in interest as the fall of the curtain comes nearer. Another day M. de Noère and I went off alone together, by a new road. It wound and meandered among the most delicious little vales, with clear streams and willows and woodlands and old squat castles here and there, and fortified manors (or castles *en déconfiture*) with just a pointed tower left, standing up over the farmyard. You could not have anything more remote. And then we arrived at Saint-Éloi, and toiled up the hill.

And there was all the plain (that is what it looks like from up here) of the old battlefield mapped out below us, away at our feet, and away and away and away indefinitely, till it faded into the nothingness of the horizon. And all the foreground of it, and the middle distance, one raw colossal camp. It was a dour panorama, under an ominous, cold, dark sky. So vast, so crowded, and yet so desert and featureless. Very far beyond, in the shadowy greyness, there was a little pale blue, hardly discernible, out of a lowland haze, — the wrecked white frontage of Arras Cathedral. Otherwise, beyond the houses and the villages of the immediate foreground there was nothing anywhere to suggest any past of human habitation.

Saint-Éloi is the culmination of a long downland. It dominates the whole country. And on the top of the eminence there was once an institution of some sort, church or college, with buildings and orchards and outhouses

about it, and a village clinging presumptuously up the sharp ascent that climbs to its feet. But Saint-Éloi had already paid the price of its pride. The Franco-Prussian War wiped it out of existence, and though it has had plenty of shelling in this war, most of the harm had already been done. And now, wherever you go in the countryside, you always see the cloven hull of its towers looming so austere magnificence on the last high top of the hill above the trees, that for a long time you can hardly believe it is a building at all. It really looks much more like some Dolomitic mass, the Kleine Zinne or the Crozzon di Brenta, smitten in two by lightning, and carried through the air miraculously like the House of Loreto, and planted down on the crest of a Picardy hill.

When you get up to it you find practically nothing left of the church (or whatever it was), except old hummocks of ruin and a green floor of grass. But there still remain the two towers, and the back wall of the apse between them. They are of the cold, grey-white Picardy stone into which the wind and the weather and one's self can dream such wonderful colours; and old shell-fire has given them a crumbled irregularity, which, even at close quarters, keeps the Dolomitic suggestion. The recent shelling has not done much more, except to tear some new raw rents, and add to the slides of white scree that slope away to the grass in front. Round on the cornices and projections up above, the wallflower has gone wild, and now it has seeded down on to the moraine below, in hundreds of tidy little round grey bushes, covered over with pale golden flowers as sweet as violets. Their effect is absurdly alpine among the white coarse jumbles.

It is quite a quiet place now, though, even if sometimes the Boche does send over a plane to bomb the village. (They do have a particular one, I am told, who comes over flying so audaciously low that nobody can fire at him: so that he comfortably has his fun and goes home again.) But the old towers are not harried any more. And, though they were probably rather ugly and dreadful when the building was complete, they have now been ruined long enough to have a hoary established dignity of their own. They are really beautiful, both near and far: very lonely and very lofty. And round their feet there is hardly anything but tumbles of lawn, away to the edge, from which the green down slopes steeply away in blurred old glacis, to the flats below. It is on that edge that one sits, to get stunned with the enormousness of that monotonous view. Tommies come up here, too, and lie about, and bring terrorists to play with. There is a cemetery, under the lee of one of the towers: bombs have battered it, and you see where graves have been blown up; and there are family memorials splintered and cracked, and big marble crosses lying about broken like tulip stems. It is all rank and embrambled and depressing.

3. NEUVILLE SAINT-VAAST

Having coped with the map, and tried to pick out various points in the landscape, we came away down into it, and out across its dreary tracts. All this bit of country, through Neuville Saint-Vaast (if you *can* go through an undiscoverable thing), is obscurely horrible. There are no wings or big hauntings. It is not only that here there is no flow and volume of long, rolling moorland lines, but

only a monotony of tame stretches, not flat enough to be a plain, and not undulating enough to be called a moor. The whole scene is stifling and stuffy and sordid, anyhow, of itself: oppressive in its gloom. There is nothing left: the desolation is crude and flagrant, and even the weeds are coarser and ranker and dingier than elsewhere. And I think it is the brutal contrast here that makes the horror. On the Somme there is a serene, empty silence: but here, in a devastation quite as naked, there is an unresting flow of life. And it is a rootless, mushroom life, this huge military organization that backs up the immediate front all along this sector. It will go forward as soon as the front does: it is a passing episode here, nothing to do with any life of the country it galvanizes. This emphasizes the deadness: these roads and camps and dumps, they are like carvings on a recent corpse. Rough red earth, and dust and sere browns, are the keynotes of the flattened-out landscape: there is a kind of hair-shirting unpleasantness about it, — an unpleasantness without tragedy or decency or dignity, — a mere arid, aggressive odiousness like sores rubbed with sand instead of being let alone to heal.

4. LIFE IN DEATH

And the unclean dust is like nothing one could believe. You move in a haze of it. We went as far as we dared, for fear of attracting Boche fire, and then alighted to make our way across the moor upland in search of brigade headquarters. Still you might have been in a camp. The place was wild and bare and dully dead from end to end; but it was crowded all the time with soldiers, making roads, making monuments, digging, delving, working in every di-

rection. The big highroad to which we had come was studded with traffic in a cloud of dust: it went on advancing straight up over a shallow rise in front, and it gave me a jump to realize that this is the highroad from Arras to Lens. So that if you went strolling quietly and comfortably along that road, you would be landed in the Boches' hands in about half an hour, supposing they let you come so far without sending you a shell.

We diverged away to the right across the fell. There were all sorts of little buildings everywhere, for all sorts of purposes: we committed indiscreet intrusions, but could nowhere find our headquarters. Nobody knew anything, and everybody was busy. For things were going on very lively, tin hats were universal, and so were shell-holes, new and old, to-day's and yesterday's: but through the unconcerned, antlike comings and goings, it was as hard as ever to see the scene. I suppose, at home, in ordinary life, one is impressed by Death, and grows to think he wants awaiting and welcoming with solemnities and preparations: it is only out here that you grow to realize him as a much simpler person, who comes and goes like you or me, without any special attention paid him.

5. CAVERNS

It was a far search. We met a Scotch-Canadian Tommy who told us tales of certain caverns that ranged under these parts. But by this time I was so emptied with hunger that I felt coldly towards those caverns: also, I could hardly understand a word he said. Violent Scotch complicated with American, produces a most baffling combination. So we proceeded onward. And in due course we

found the caverns were to be our portion, whether we wanted or no. For it was down somewhere in those caverns that the general had his lair. At last we arrived upon their mouth, unpretentiously lurking among hummocks. And down we went. And down and down and down, until we found ourselves in such a gigantic system of limestone-hewn catacombs as not even the last stages of starvation could prevent me from appreciating. In and out and round-about they ramified: beautifully clean and swept and garrisoned, as dry as bones, brilliant with electric light, and filled with an exhilarating, cool, blue-feeling air.

After we had had some coffee the general volunteered to take us on to the moor and over the edge, to show us the scene, and explain it. So up we climbed again, and out, and over the brow of the fell.

6. THE PLAIN OF LENS

It is something quite stupefying, that view. It was not in the very least like anything I had either thought of or expected. I have gone on telling you that this country is a corrugation of hill-ranges, in a slack sequence of undulations. Well, here they all at once leave off: and there is suddenly nothing any more in front of you except a vast violet-coloured moorland plain straight down beneath, stretching away and away into infinity. The only thing it suggests is climbing out over the front of a sea-fell, and coming upon the sight of a great estuary at your feet, covered with a sea of thrift, and flats of dark seaweed in drifts of shadow and darkness over the dun-coloured expanse. You keep on wondering when the tide will come in, and straining your eyes for the sea which must certainly be

there, somewhere out beyond, where the flatness fails and faints into the haze. Or else it might be the floor of some lunar crater seen from its walls, before the moon had gone quite dead; with skeletons of lunar giants still lingering. For here and there along the slopes of the sky-line extinct mine-heads stand up grim and black and gaunt like dead Martians.

The whole atmosphere, too, was to match that afternoon; and Lens lay dim under murk, with wonderful lights of dun and blue and purple that came and went, darkening and unveiling successive stretches of it in slants of shifting, opalescent shadow. In that bronzy, lurid glow, there was a tremendous impression of doom brooding, and in the city, and out beyond it, you could just see congregations of tall chimneys fading away in the heavy haze; and a pale, ghostly thing like a kettle on stilts that made me think of a Martian not yet dead, but waiting to die.

7. LENS

You get the anguish of the hills here very plainly. Down below the enemy have now been driven from their last barriers into the defenceless plain, huddled and crowded into Lens, and there harried by day and night with shells and gas, till they are learning thoroughly the taste of their own hell. Our own people are half into Lens, too, they say now, and night by night advance some twenty yards or so, fighting from house to ruined house, as if it were the Middle Ages. We could have taken it long since, of course, had we cared to squander lives in hurrying the inevitable: as it is, we go carefully, bit by bit, destroying as many as possible of the enemy, with the least possible

loss to ourselves. As the general told me in his pale old silver voice, — it might have been a bishop saying grace over a vegetarian lunch, — his men go into Lens every night “just killing Boches till they’re fairly sick of killing them.” It seemed so very unreal, as I looked down into the red-brick stretches of the city, apparently quite silent and empty, to be told of all that rage and wretchedness incessantly going on there.

8. THE UTTERMOST DEATH

But what a waste, what a monstrous, malevolent muddle it all is! The view from Thélus Ridge is heart-breaking. You would not think the death of a Black Country would be anything but a mercy. But when you look over the whole of this enormous distance, and see that it is all, all houses as far as you can see, and all of it either perfectly dead and silent, or else strangling in horror, then it makes you just uselessly ache. Away up on the left, the circuit of the downs sweeps round into the dimness, enclosing Lens and its bay of the estuary: and it was one indeterminate, endless town once, over the level lengths of that highland. And now it is all nothing but one broken-up red wilderness of death, with those gaunt dead Martians here and there along the sky-line. And down below is Lens, where all this is going on, a serried blur of streets and houses, with those clusters of tall chimneys thrusting up their colonies like stalagmites, away and away till they are lost in the dimness that gradually becomes Lille and Roubaix and Tourcoing. Through the glasses you can see streets and flats of water — Boche floods being let loose for defence; and straight white streaks of streets climbing

and slanting: without ever a black speck of life to break their emptiness.

9. THE VOID OF WAR

And then you get another actuality of things. Overhead go wailing our own shells, and in a little while a cloud of white or dingy smoke breaks up in Lens, now in one point, now in another. And you suddenly feel a real ill-will of your own going with it. The Boche keeps on answering back. Our own front lines waver across the estuary below the town in a dim thread: and often you will see chalky bursts there of Boche shell-fire. They are always at it, more or less: Angres and Liévin have been reduced to skeletons; and down below at your feet here is another strip of what they call the void of war — Petit Vimy, and Vimy round the corner under the hill. The void of war is a splendid name! It means these places completely battered and smashed and apparently quite lifeless and abandoned: yet really with military life buzzing in them indefatigably, and hidden batteries always at work looking for points in Lens, or else being looked for themselves by German ones. When we were on the ridge it was a fairly busy day. Along our lines the sausages watched from aloft, and the planes went booming: we heard the dry poppety-pop-pop-popping of the Archies, and the sky broke out into little round fluffets of smoke, black or white.

And all the time the Boches were plugging big stuff into the ruins at the foot of the hill, hunting for the batteries. Thud and thud and thud into Vimy and Little Vimy they kept coming, and huge tawny mountains of smoke burst up. It makes one wonder what it must be like to be in one

of those hidden batteries, with nothing whatever to do but stay there and go on being hunted. And so the game goes on perpetually, with relaxations and intensifications, and queer tacit conventions between the enemies, about lunch-time and so forth, and if you don't worry a certain point of me, I'll return the courtesy to a certain point of you. As we turned to go back, over the shell-shattered face of the moorland, our own fire began to liven up: and I rejoiced in the endearing scream of the shells passing overhead. Sometimes the guns sigh out a perfect smoke-ring, that floats upwards in beautiful, unbroken undulations till you lose it.

10. THE RAT

It was darkening luridly when we came away, and in the distance Saint-Éloi loomed silvery in bursts of haze just like gun-fire. Hunger possessed me, however, to the exclusion of all other thoughts: along the crowded traffic of the Souchez road we proceeded, in hopes of finding a place not too hopelessly dusty. But, of course, the whole air was dense, and finally we had to find our pleasant spot just off the roadside, a bosage of old barbed wire, with thistles and nettles to vary it, among the dull-coloured coarse grass. However, all spots where one drives the wolf from the door are pleasant, *ipso facto*: and as we ate, we were joined by a guest. For out of the abandoned trench into which our feet were dangling there came lolling a patriarchal old rat, with a pink, bald tail, and patches of mange, and one beady eye. But I suppose he was blasé with unaccustomed food and company. Anyhow, he eyed us with dislike and went his way.

II. SOUCHEZ

After this the road dips down into the vale of Souchez. And then, indeed, you do get the hills on guard. For Souchez lies in a deep dell between two of the most momentous of all the war. Up on the left rises the long line of the down from which we have just descended: it is Vimy Ridge. And, answering it across the glen, rises Notre Dame de Lorette, in much steeper, sharper slopes of green and hedges than you see on any other of these hills. Vimy is the long, high wall, barring out the plain of Lens: and Notre Dame is the culminating height of another big down-mass that converges towards it at an angle. But the valley of Souchez cuts deeply between them, and is like a creek running out to the sea. For, between the fells that enclose you on either side, you look straight down the gully from Souchez to Angres and Liévin and Lens, and the vast expanse beyond.

It is an evil, tragic hollow. Souchez itself is dreary enough. At least — no: for there is nothing left of it at all, except a few bleary hummocks of weed in and out among the stumps of a few blasted trees. But where the two roads come together there was the Château de Careuil and a church in the point of the junction; and the rest of it, up the widening angle of the valley behind, was the park and woods of Careuil: and of park and woods only a half-smashed wreck subsists. There is a pond, and you can trace the outlines of plantings and plantings, by a few golden elders that are sprouting up again in the jungles, and make you realize that somebody once bought fancy shrubs for this place which now looks as if nothing but chaos had ever reigned here.

12. CHÂTEAU DE CAREUIL

As for the woods, they are gone, like all the woods of these parts, into a mere bristle of grey-black skeletons. It is only as the triangle broadens up the valley that bit by bit they show more life, till at the end of it they are as vital as those at the bottom of the dip are dead. All the desolate hollow is filled with life — quarryings and road-makings and excavations and clearings-up: incidentally they are disembowelling the ruins of the castle itself to get bricks for remaking the roads. And the whole scene has that dusty, squalid dirtiness that is the keynote along all this stretch of the front, where the old life is dead and the new has not attempted to strike root. The castle is still a mere mountainous mess, with twisted baths and shutters and things writhing among the heaps: in a side nook of ruin I came on what had evidently been the castle conservatory, with two trunks of palms, beheaded and stark, emerging from piles of bricks and splinters of coloured glass.

13. VIMY RIDGE

But the bustling, arid ugliness in the murdered dell is nothing to the oppression of the two hills on either side. I do not know which is the worse: Notre Dame with her ominous sharp slopes and drops on the one hand; or Vimy on the other, with its hog's back. Out of Souchez you cross a shell-blistered flat to the foot of Vimy. All the trees and houses are not only ruined here, but obliterated absolutely. Soldiers are busy making roads and rails to feed the ridge for new efforts. You cannot put in a spade without turning

up nastinesses: disentombed skulls sit about on fallen tree-trunks till people have had enough of them. It is an indescribable sordid chaos of weeds and oddments and mess, made yet more horrible by this pervasive buzz of activity going on the whole time.

And so one reaches the foot of the fell, and begins to ascend it by a fine new road which is now in process of being made yet finer. On the top it is prolonged on lengths of corduroy, and all up its curve there are lorries and road-builders. You are in the heart of the Boche trenches and defences here: and at the turn of the coil there overhangs you what I can only call a huge castle of sandbags, in hillocks far and wide, now scattered over the scene in piles of white ruins, almost naked of weeds, and very ghastly in its grey desolateness, exactly as if it were piles of thousands of bodies, helter-skeltered into heaps a year or two since, and left lying.

(Later)

I have been again and again to Vimy and Souchez in these past days, and the tremendousness of their impression only deepens more and more. These are *the* spots, if one wants to get soaked and sodden and macerated in the magnificent misery of the war. They draw me and hold me like magnets: I have never had enough. And, though I have now seen them in many conditions, with a good deal of activity going on, and with little, and with none, every time I have been here the view has always lain under the same canopy of brooding thunderousness, with rosy-blue, livid lights that veil and reveal. It is the absolute atmosphere and colouring that the God-damned gloomy splendour of this extinguished world wants.

The top of Vimy Ridge gives you a much more immediate view into Lens than Thélus did. Because here you have it almost at your feet, and can really see the streets and individual houses, as still and apparently lifeless as any city of the dead. There are two little promontories, too, that jut out into the bay from what one keeps on thinking of as the coast: and between them Angres and Liévin straggle indiscriminately up the dip towards the road. The one immediately below Vimy is the Bois des Hirondelles: it must have made a pleasant Sunday out for the inhabitants of Lens, for it is covered with a wood. But now the trees are all ragged and tattered, and the place would not be healthy to walk in, even if there were any one left to do so.

That particular day there was nothing doing on our part, which must have been irritating for the Boche, as he, on his, was doing quite a good deal. We got off the road on the top of the ridge, and made our way over the broken ground to its highest point. Weeds have not yet had time to make a shroud here: it is bald and brutal and raw, shell-holes and pits and craters — very bad going over the clogged, reddish earth, still full of débris and duds and splinters and twists of wire. You avoid sky-lines in places like these, and make your way obscurely among the hummocks till you have reached some point over the brow, where you can more or less safely lie out.

On your left the ridge sinks away towards the dip of Angres and Liévin; and the broad round shoulder of it is like a field that has been ploughed up by some Olympian hail — a mere red waste of bare hummocks and breasts, with here and there a wooden cross perched on an eminence

among the desolation. In front of you the fell falls gradually away towards slopes of moorland, and then to the promontory of the Bois des Hirondelles below; and just at the neck an old dead pit-head stands, seeming so close that you could almost throw a stone down into it. And round the laps of the hill a little sparse coppice lingers, and a few trees.

That day the Boche was very inquisitive about what might be going on in their shelter. As we lay, the shelling was constant, and the air was full of that curious humming, vibrating wail, that seems to swell towards you rather as an express train does, with a sort of magical intensity: reaches its zenith, and then passes. The noise always seems coming straight at one's own stomach: there is a very great psychological difference between one's appreciation of our own shells as they go and of the enemy's as they come. It took me quite a time to sit happy in the sound of those oncoming screams — until I realized that the noise of them went on long after the actual shell had burst in the wood, a quarter of a mile below, many seconds before the shriek had reached its highest height in one's own ears.

14. COLD COURAGE

My mind was all the while down in the battery among those men in the very centre of that roaring onrush, and knowing that any moment one of those shells might find its billet and blow them all to pieces; — yet continuing imperturbable at their work. Courage like that does seem so coldly tremendous; and yet, in the work of modern war, it has to be a mere matter of course, and nothing particular to talk about. But even if passive bravery like

that becomes a habit, in its way it is even more impressive than the personal courage of a rush. Because it is more unnatural; the courage of cold blood and brain, not of hot: a question of endurance, not of action.

All the time they went on thudding at that battery down below, and every burst was a mound of dirty black and tawny smoke. And then they also turned their attention on to Angres and Liévin. As I watched, a house would suddenly crumble into a towering mass of cloud: and a moment later would come the burst. If you look through the glasses you see everything a skeleton, and you would wonder what the Boches were firing at, if you did not know that without a very good reason they would not do it. Yet it is always so hard to realize the life that is going on so busily in and out of those shattered hulks in the zone of war. There is never any glimpse of it. As for our own guns, they were completely silent. At first I rejoiced, feeling what a snub it must be for the Boches. Returning no answer at all is the very surest way of increasing wrath. However, as time went on, and still the German shells came crashing unrebuked in the direction of the pithead down below us, and as still house after house in Angres and Liévin disintegrated into a mountain of dust and smoke, I began to feel a certain impatience creeping over me. And with it the sudden realization of a moral decline — as I suppose some people might call it — in myself.

15. IRA SACRA

For I found myself quite definitely longing to see the Boche hammered, quite acutely longing to take a part in the hammering myself. When at last a few rare shells of

our own did begin to fly, my whole heart leapt savagely out with them as they went, and I watched with panting eyes for their burst over the blurred, hazy levels of Lens, and I blessed the flashing bark of the gun that sent them every time, and I faced without any qualm — except that I could not feel one — the full prospect of the mess and misery I cordially hoped they would produce out there. That is what it means to get caught, by so much as a finger's tip, in the wheels of a wicked machinery. And yet evil dragons have got to be got under, and where would be the use of me or you if we did not have a hand and a joy in the process? But it is illuminating to find what an upheaval of indignation this work of Germany has made in what one had always thought the dead-flat civilizedness of one's own mind.

16. THE SANDBAG REDOUBT

Wandering about on the down-top of Vimy Ridge is difficult and grisly. It is the wildest waste of chalk, tossed about madly, as if a child had run amuck on the sands with a spade. There are no mere hillocks and holes here; it is mountains and dales and ghylls: with trenches meandering through the ranges, and the odds and ends of battle lying about. With all the work going on below, indeed, and on the road, some of it has become trodden ground, but only on certain lines. The rest is a white wilderness, spattered over with weeds and poppies and vulgar yellow crucifers. It does not seem dead like the Somme. For, apart from soldiers coming and going, there are also whole flocks of little birds. They were not in the least concerned about the shelling: thousands of them were busily

mobbing a hawk, and the sky was aflutter with tiny wings: and then, when they had successfully driven away their Boche, they went and sat in rows on the new telegraph-wires, and chattered about it passionately, "all talking together, but Rebecca loudest."

On the estuary side, of course, you cannot descend the brow: if you come down on the Souchez side, you are very soon among the ruins of that enormous redoubt of sand-bags. It really is like a great white castle of corpses, blown away into heaps and piles and masses in every direction. It is a hateful scene of ruin in its suggestion of human wreckage, ashen pale and formless, and dragged with lying out in sun and rain for months. In its deepest, longest dale derelict metal sheeting has been put up for rifle practice, and the place is still full of snarls of wire and broken old rifles. It is quite a relief to climb out on to its crest again, and look down into the valley.

17. THE TAKING OF THE RIDGE

Immediately at your feet it lies, with little emmets of men at work, and the roads crowded with traffic and full of dust. Up behind, in the dip between the fells, ranges the dell of Careuil in a widening triangle. And straight opposite are the green bluffs and steeps and headlands of Notre Dame, with the white bones of Ablain Saint-Nazaire Church sticking gauntly up under its flank. You do get the impressiveness and the horror of the scene from here. You look across at Notre Dame, and you see it at once as the last, worst castle of the Boche, looming down on the awful bravery of the French, who left their dead in tens of thousands all over its scarps before they could take it. Now

it is a mere green hill again: but there is still an oppression of evil about it. In a quiet tilt it slants away on the far side, but on this it gathers itself in frowns: and you realize what it must have been to go walking up there in the teeth of a blistering fire.

And Vimy itself is just as terrible. You look down the steep slope, and there are the Boche trenches: and below that the valley and the helpless lowlands on which our men were dominated from the hog's-back of the ridge. And then you think of the Canadians simply strolling up it one fine day, and the Boches merely evacuating in a stupor of paralyzed amazement that any mortal man should have dared a thing so unbelievably impossible. Days and days and days of crying wolf with a ten minutes' barrage followed by nothing: and then the same thing, followed unexpectedly by the great assault — as soon as the enemy had safely learned he need never expect it. And so a victory that meant the capture of the last Boche stronghold along this line, with the command of Lens and all the plain.

18. PHYSICAL COURAGE

It is a very good tale. In the policed and placid atmosphere of the Uncles physical courage is looked upon as rather a brutal, unintellectual thing, because it is never wanted. Yet, of course, in the long run, it is *the* thing and the only thing. I have gone on talking all this while about the huge mechanicalness of the war, till it has become a Titan's fury of machines and of brains rather than bodies in an agonizing battle of endurance rather than in any glad burst of rough-and-tumble. But here at last I come to understand that there inevitably arrives the moment

when all that side of it ceases, and an army depends entirely on man's individual physical courage. When all the guns have had their say and done their work, and all the batteries borne the brunt, then there arrives the personal turn of the men: and forward they go, just as much on their own mere legs and mere strength as ever they went up against Troy or Babylon. It is a curious climax to our immeasurable elaborations of machinery: but there it is: the ultimate source of victory is man, and man alone.

And it makes me see courage with a very much livelier eye. On a spot like this I become merely tired out with understanding the terrible glory of it. And that terrible gloriousness is the spirit that cultured people at home tacitly tended to consider a trifle crude and *arriéré* and primitive; and patted on the head with a timorous distaste, as if it had been a dingo dog from aboriginal wilds. Yes, that is another of the things I have found out here: and I don't much care if you do tell me you could arrive at all these meditations for yourself, "whenever you thought it worth while." It is always worth while to think about things, especially if they seem obvious when you do. Because, in that case, it is long odds that you never did really think about them at all. And anyhow, the great point is, the new lights and things that all this breaks open into *me*, just the average unrealizer. For the things out here are not possibly things you could understand without coming here.

19. NOTRE DAME DE LORETTE

As for Notre Dame, the way I have always been up it is from behind Ablain Saint-Nazaire Church, the way the French went. Now the smooth green bays that slope

round the fell-foot are turned into a camp, and even the top is perfectly different from what I had anticipated. I had been told it was the wildest and wickedest waste of them all, and still alive with human oddments scattered in the grass. For the French have none of our finicalness about tidying up the dead, whether their own or anybody else's. However, the Canadians have been here since and cleaned up everything, to the tune of some six or seven hundred bodies that they found lying out in the débris. And mules have been turned loose to graze the whole down.

So you climb up steeply and sharply, in and out of old trenches, haunted with a picture of what it must have been like to escalate this fortress under fire: and then you come out on what is not a tumbled jungle of weeds at all, like the other hills, but simply an alpine lawn, smooth and cropped and vividly green and elastic to the tread. It is dimpled with shell-holes, of course, — but not by any means ravaged like the others, universally. It is a surprisingly bland place, in fact, and all the more sinister for that. As you ramble about on the huge smooth tilt of the summit you do find here and there bits of skulls and ribs and boots: and there are very repulsive trenches, water-logged and wattled and half-full of brown, stinking mess, with dark, ominous dug-outs to match. But of Notre Dame, if ever she had a chapel here, not a stick or stone remains: the moorland is perfectly empty and smooth and bare.

20. THE VOID OF FEAR

And as we sat and looked, the captain and I, there came up to us an ugly little Canadian Tommy, astray from the camp below. Without the least regard to decencies,

dignities, disciplines, "circles, spheres, lines, ranks, everything," he came up to us as bold as brass and entered quite cheerfully into conversation. The captain was staggered, and tried to strike a mien between acquiescence and a due repressiveness. For it was such preposterous impudence, — or it would have been, if the lad had had the slightest idea that it was impudence at all, or what august proprieties he was violating. But it was immediately clear that he was perfectly innocent and naïf: it was like a little new boy cheerily engaging the captain of the eleven in chat, without the least notion of the enormity he is committing. Of course, had this not been so, and, of course, had he been English, he would not have been allowed to go on another minute. As it was, we tried cold, short answers, unresponsive without being positively crushing. It was not the least use: he babbled on at us quite unchilled. We then tried flight, but he pursued us: we scattered across the face of the moorland, but he would not be detached. Finally, we gave up and collapsed under a grassy trench-ridge, in front of the view. And he came with us, and sat down gaily at our side, and borrowed the glasses and prattled along undaunted.

And then at last I began to understand the hectic fever of his speech, and his hungry, undefeatable cordiality. That poor little soul was face to face with the extremity of mortal terror. This was his very first day up at the front: it appeared, he did not know a single soul, had not a single friend or even an acquaintance to talk to, — everything was utterly strange to him, filled with the void of fear. For there before him was Vimy Ridge, on which his only brother had been killed a few months earlier, and now lay

namelessly buried: and down in front of him was Lens, a smashed-up skeleton of anguish and death: and all that fearful landscape empty of everything but waste and murder and martyrdom. It was out into that that he himself was to go, at any moment. He was frantic to hold on to the light and warmth of life a little longer while it lasted.

He knew, and we knew ourselves, that in a few days he would almost certainly be dead. We were human beings like himself, and he did not care who or what: he merely craved the warm-bloodedness of our presence, and the sound of human speech going on continually to drown his own thoughts. It is a dreadful thing, that high extremity of suffering which feverishly hides itself behind a curtain of prattle. You hear the silence inside, and the deadly cold. Yet what can one do? Uttermost loneliness is the place where we all live, when the big things come along.

We bore with him, in a dull, useless ache, realizing impotently the clutching agony of his need to stay linked on; in face of which one could only be inarticulate at the best. And at last he got up with a wrench, and said that "a man down there" (the only person, it seemed, he had spoken to out here yet, and he had no notion more of him, or who he was) had said that he ought to be back in camp by such and such a time. It was a relief at last to have something we *could* say. We all wished him good luck, as he went. "Good luck, you fellows," he answered breezily, and vanished over the brow of the hill, dark against the glare of the west.

We ourselves went down soon after.

Yours

R. F.

XII. YPRES

Château de Noère

I had meant to make this a postscript, but I see it will have to become a fresh letter. I kept the other one open for a long time because I did not know what I was going to do, or whether I should have a chance of writing again. Any day I may have to go to Paris and I do not want my impression to grow cold while I am travelling across the world without any chance of a moment's quiet to set them down. Nor, anyhow, would Ypres go into a postscript.

I. HOSPITAL BARGES

My usual weather-luck held: the day was dark just when it should have been, and radiant all the rest of the time. It is a glorious drive, in and out among the downs to Saint-Omer: and as rurally peaceful as the heart of the most vindictive pacifist could desire. In Saint-Omer we were held up on the edge of the canal, and in time a string of hospital barges floated by on their way to the railway. It is a side of the war I had not seen. I dislike the idea of going round hospitals: it seems such an impertinent intrusion. I should detest, myself, to be pried upon by strangers, if I were lying up in bandages, looking my worst and entirely disinclined to cope with small-talk which could not help being either patronizing or inquisitive. However I dare say I am wrong: it never does to gauge other people's likes and dislikes by one's own. (As has been already very

much better said by Miss Woodhouse, of Hartfield.) Anyhow, from those hospital barges I got the notion of what it was I had deliberately missed. From the bridge I peered down through their open hatches as they went slowly by beneath, gliding without a vibration down the glassy water. Bed after bed as white as snowdrops and as neat as a virgin table-napkin: and their inmates nicely tucked into the middle of them, straight and tidy and folded up, and almost startlingly ruddy on the whiteness.

It was no use to tell one's self that this is not at all like the condition of things up in the whirl of the actual fighting, where I suppose there is bound to be a certain amount of mess and muddle. I expect I exaggerate even this in my imagination: but the beautiful orderliness and calm of these later arrangements for the wounded do take my breath away: and so do the long trains full of beds that one sees on the lines. Perhaps it may only rise out of utilitarianism, but certainly modern war has enormously developed humaneness. Think of what the old armies suffered, and the murderous morass of slackness and corruption into which Florence Nightingale had to force her way — the ghastly waste of lives and agonies, the huddle-muddle of ignorance and indifference and neglect. And now you have an army that consists of a whole population; and it is nothing so much as one vast training school for the well and a perfectly organized hospital for the sick.

It is really splendid and inspiring: I would above all things choose to be a doctor to these fellows, if I could. If the war has stopped research for another twenty years, it has certainly in a measure handed back more than it has robbed, in this gigantic opportunity it has given science

for alleviating miseries and making mutilations good by miracle.

I did acutely delight in watching those long, cool rooms sliding by, filled with quiet and coolness and flowers, and the relaxed comfortableness of those men at rest among cleanness and calm after the hells they have traversed. It is a paradox, but however ill they might have been in England, they would never have had anything like this, hardly even in the best of hospitals. While as for their own homes! — I suppose it is because these reflections are so obvious that they make one feel so sentimental. Do you remember how General Tilney was convinced that Catherine's fine mind must be gratified by "a view of the accommodations and comforts by which the labours of her inferiors were softened?" — Which, altering the name to Sairey Gamp, — by which I mean "superiors," — "I drinks: with love and tenderness."

2. THE MOVING ARMY

The rest of Saint-Omer gives me nothing salient to remember. For soon after this we came into the solid procession of a whole army on the move; and took our place. It is an extraordinarily imposing sight: all the time it keeps you crushed in amazement. There is nothing very much one can say about it: it is a gigantic generalized magnificence, and if I tried to pick out its details and say how many soup-kitchens there are, and how many lorries, and how many guns, and so on, I should lose the whole in the parts, and give no picture at all. None the less, though your imagination has to take it for granted that a moving army *must* be just so, it does not do to elide the whole

thing in your mind as an inevitable commonplace. Inevitable it may be: commonplace it certainly is not. And you can never come into the slow, relentless flood-tide of it, without being swept off your feet each time, mentally as well as almost physically. It is the real living organism, not a painted masquerade like a review. And that is how you have to see it: — an enormous living thing, of which one's self becomes a mere corpuscle in the main flow of its aorta.

3. CASSEL

In the middle of this I do not find I can see the country at all. However, Cassel is a salient point. It literally is. For Cassel, of course, is a twin citadel to Kemmel, and rises with the same abrupt irrelevance out of the scurry of low downs that stretch otherwise over all the landscape. Up very steep curls of road you mount, to find a fascinating old town huddling on the hilltop, like a huddle of little birds on the crown of a pointed rock. There is a big cobbled market-place, and gabled beautiful houses, and everything serene and cosy and full of a conscious, immemorial calm. For though she lives on the fighting front, Cassel is still inviolate by Boche fire. No thanks to the Boche for that; it is only because she is inviolable. The hill rises too high for the angle of the Boche guns. So there the town steadily sits, and gently defies them all. The actual crown of the hill rises a little above the *place*, and is surmounted and almost overflowed by a huge block of hospital buildings of Le Roi Soleil — a dreary, bald mass in baroque Jesuit taste. And in front of it lies a stretch of lawn, with a wonderful monument on which

are recorded the various events of which Cassel has been the scene or the victim. (So that she has well earned her present immunity.) The Cæsars and Attilas defile before one; but the best record of all is of somebody who "for a long time had here his tomb" — until, presumably, he grew bored, in fact, and removed with it elsewhere. From this hilltop you have the whole country and the battle-area all laid out below you as if on a map. It is so wonderful a view in its vast monotony that I can remember none of it. Anyhow, it gives the impression of being much flatter than the country down towards Arras: and straight ahead, far out lies Ypres.

4. VLAMERTINGHE

The steady streaming volume of the army — in which we were submerged again as soon as we descended from Cassel — does quite obliterate itineraries and details. You only feel the multitudes, the officers, the men, the lorries, the general hurly-burly. So that the next thing I got hold of was Vlamertinghe, in a backwater of the main movement (which goes spating on through Poperinghe). A half-dead little red-brick place it is, with its grey stone church shattered into nothing, and its square tower with only the frontage left standing, looking like a two-dimensional thing cut out in cardboard, very high and flat. And round the corner was another of those crucifixes such as correspondents love to make picturesqueries about; a miserable Jesus with his legs blown through.

After this we wandered away for a while into side-tracks, zigzagging in dusty lanes in a flat land, till at last, in a conducive spot, we alighted to sit on a bank, in the

precincts of an emparked red château that had had its taste of shelling, and now was serving as some headquarters. The country round was in a half-and-half state — not by any means cultivated and peaceful, but not battered out of all semblance of life either. It was nothing worse than dreary, rather like a colossal goods-yard in a railway station, full of rawness and weeds, with new railway lines and works going on.

5. THE AIR ATTACK

Overhead the long line of sausages kept guard, innocently white against the blue of the sky, but grotesque, repulsive objects in themselves. They always look like some monstrous sea-calves bobbing in the depths of the air, or like giant evolutions of slugs, that have learned, unlike pigs, to fly. Anyhow, we wore our tin hats, and uneventfully ate lunch in that placid scene. And then, quite suddenly, its peace broke up into pandemonium. The sky was wild, by now, and getting wilder, with races of rolling cloud across the remaining drifts of blue: for a long time I could not see what all the noise was about, although uncannily the whole heaven continued erupting into round wools of white smoke that stayed where they were. And then I did see the enemy. Quite a drove of Taubes, mere specks in the infinite blue of the zenith. I suppose the peak of the Matterhorn would hardly have grazed them. Smoothly they sailed on over our lines: the air boomed with their noise, and cracked and clattered with Archies.

And then, circling and soaring, out went our own covey to meet the enemy. Sometimes I caught a glint of silver in the sun as up they went, and wheeled and mounted in

sweeps. They were soon as infinitesimal as the rest, and like the rest they seemed to have gathered instantly out of nowhere and nothing, like gnats in a blink of sunshine between storms. And the great empty sky seemed populous and crowded with their flighting. So for a few minutes they manœuvred in their coveys, and then the Boches all went home, and our own came back, and in another moment everything was silent and peaceful again, and the sky as utterly empty as if Icarus had never flown, and the air were still inviolate. Two minutes later, and you would not have believed that anything ever had happened up there, or ever could.

Until there arose another battle — a ridiculous parody of the first. For out across the blue there came sailing a dense battalion of small birds, pursued by a hawk. Up and down they went, and back and over, with a unanimous flittering shimmer of wings as they veered this way and that from the darts and dives of the enemy. All in a solid sheet they alternately towered and sank, in a ripple of little flutterings, touched with silver like our planes, as the sunshine caught them on the turn: the drill of them was a wonder to watch. And so they went streeling away by degrees over the sky, and were gone: and once more everything was empty again. The hawk had caught none of them. Ah, Christian friends, what a lesson is not this in the pricelessness of unity against the wicked!

6. THE DENSE ADVANCE

But by this time the day was become overcast, and our onward way to Ypres lay straight ahead into heavier and heavier darkness. At Poperinghe we were swallowed

again in the main stream of movement. The *Sturm und Drang* grew denser and denser as we advanced, too: presently it was impossible to go at more than a footpace, wedged up hard and solid in the traffic. It became perfectly gloomy and dark and soon we moved through an unbroken veil of fine rain. The raw, wet brown of mud was the keynote everywhere: brown, slithery roads, brown fields, brown, dismal flats of landscape dimming out into the haze of wet. Whenever we could we dodged off the main road, on to its new side-channels, designed to relieve the congestion. They seemed nearly as bad themselves, though, until one looked ahead, and there was the main road again, one massive, multitudinous movement, profiled in a blur on the pale fog. But at last there was no help for it, and we had to take our place finally in the wedged advance; and so very slowly proceeded, until suddenly we were entering the unimaginable ruins of Ypres.

7. YPRES

Ypres is like nothing I have yet seen. For here I was actually in that void of war on which I had merely looked down from Vimy Ridge. Ypres is not merely peppered and punctured and perforated like Arras; it is not exploded and murdered like Péronne; it is not obliterated off the face of the earth like the Somme villages. It is ruined and crushed to a mere broken skeleton; and looks like nothing so much as a wreckage of sugar houses, left out for months past to crumble and melt in the weather. It is mere bones — shards and splinters and shells of buildings, not even clear-cut in outline, but dulled and blurred. It is so utterly dead that even its skeleton is decaying. And yet all the time

it is more actively alive than any living town, with a malign factitious life that has nothing to do with its own. You feel it a harmless bag of bones that has been galvanized into fresh activity by a ghoul. It is a thing possessed — a stalking, reanimated corpse. Men and batteries and all the organization of the front are dense among these ruins that seem so vacant; and in and out among them they play perpetual hide and seek against the Boche guns.

It is on a day like mine that you ought to see Ypres. The heavy darkness, the fine, sad rain, exactly suit the abominable passive mournfulness of the place. It is filled with mess and muddle and busy-ness the whole time; and the crowded, dreary stir continues unbroken, to the front. The impression of it takes hold of me and shakes me in quite a new way. I had thought by now I had run the gantlet of all the wretchedness out here, and suffered as much as I either could or should. A satiated calm of sheer tiredness was what I had been hoping for. But Ypres has started me off afresh, in a new storm of impotent anguishes that lead nowhere. /

8. THE MENIN ROAD

We went out of it along the Menin Road, towards the actual front. It was a squalid, dreary scene, — waterlogged, messy, muddy flats, — allotment gardens it might once have been, but now ploughed up with fire, and turned to a ruinous waste of watery holes and weeds and mud. And still the shells and the gas keep coming and going. The Menin Road was the rawest, realest chaos of recent warfare that I have yet seen in full, actual process of activity.

And there was a thing there that was more cheering than anything yet. For along the roadside there is a screening of reeds and mats, to hide its traffic from Boche view. And now those screens are quite worn out and derelict, falling and flopping in tatters forlornly. But it is worth nobody's while to restore them any more. And you suddenly realize this, and what it means: the Boche really *is* being driven back and back: and here is the visible proof.

9. HARDENING HATE

All the way along the squalor of that road, in fact, I felt my feelings hardening and heightening. Did I tell you how one gradually develops a personal baresarkness of one's own against the Boche? Well, it grows and grows upon me. I do not care now whether it is a good sign or a bad, but I have come to a real, keen pitch of personal desire to see him being lessoned. Nothing short of it satisfies me. I am blasé with peaceful sights and dead scenes and quiet desolations: I hunger for actualities, and come away disappointed from everything that most excited me at first.

Even Ypres was not enough. The air was full of the hooning and thudding of shells: but one could not see, one could not help, one was not on the spot. We had been promised a visit to a peculiarly unhealthy place, out in the front, where things were going on, and "stuff" coming over copiously. But when we had advanced a certain distance along the Menin Road, into sight of a low rise of dark hill the plan came up for reconsideration, and the way was said to be long, and the day unpropitious, and the perils not worth while. So that the general feeling was in favour

of abandoning the scheme; I felt it inevitable to agree. But it was "with smiles of the most exquisite misery (*real* misery, not like Isabella's) and the laughing eye of of utter despondency," that I did so.

And yet, what good could it have done me, had we gone? Not for a moment did I wish to be blown up with a shell, or get any one else blown up either: and if we had gone, there would not have been anything one could actually do. And yet I was disappointed not to go. It seems so aimless to want with all one's might to go to a place where one will certainly be frightened out of one's seven senses, and possibly slain into the bargain. It was not even that I wanted to show off to myself. I really believe it was a genuine feeling that I myself should in a way be taking a hand in the good work, through the mere fact of undergoing a little risk to be on the spot. Any share, even a vicarious one, is something I come to crave for more and more, the more I see the misery that the Boche has loosed on the world.

10. THE MARKET-PLACE

However, there was no more to be said. Sadly my eyes wandered — they were all of me that could — away from the road, down through those dreary splinters of wood and blackened spars of coppice, into rain-veiled distances of further blasted trees where the guns were booming most loudly: we turned the car, and came slowly bumping back again into Ypres through the muddy lakes and shell-holes of the overworked road, and over the moat with its red walls, scarred and battered by shell-fire. And in the huge cobbled market-place I alighted by myself to roam and

ponder, while the others went on to quest vainly for some spot where one of them had had lunch in 1914.

II. THE TRAFFIC-CONTROLLER

In a way the market-place of Ypres is the very heart of the war. There is a perfect pulsation of life there, amid melted-down desolateness that you could not believe unless you saw it. Yet everything is so well arranged and kept, and the traffic directed as diligently as any policeman directs it in Piccadilly. Only here the road-rulers have other cares than merely to get you safe across. Troops of men are always coming or going. And they are all in helmets, of course, but sometimes their nosebags are not hitched up close under the chin for an emergency call: or so some other detail of safety has been ignored. The traffic superintendent has to see to all these things as the troops go by, and keep a general eye on everybody. You see for the thousandth time that this discipline is not brutal military tyranny, but a medical prescription.

This particular superintendent was particularly inappropriate in such a spot. He was exactly like Teddy Harrison, — the shape and color of a poached egg — *à la Portugaise*, — and I felt it absurdly homely to be having a chat with him in that preposterous place. There was death everywhere, and the air was dark and heavy with shells and gas and gloom and rain: on the sombre background that Augustan chubbiness fairly glowed, in his crimson illumination. Of course, he was from the country (as I soon found out): they tell me everywhere that the country lads can stand a great deal more, though less alert and intelligent and precious in a dash: while the in-

telligent alertness and *élan* of the city-bred has to be paid for by a quicker end to their brighter blaze.

12. THE EMPTIED DEAD

But I suppose one grows accustomed to everything; even to directing the traffic in the market-place of Ypres, with a tin hat on, and shells and poisons always flying. You hear them all the time, and you get visible evidence of their work. From time to time, there come by the quiet processions of the dead — limp-looking, helpless dead, mummied tightly up in their dark grey blankets ready for burial, and looking so heartbreakingly small: — poor little emptied things, hardly more than half the size of the full ones who are swinging them down the street.

Tramp, tramp, tramp over the cobbled expanses the processions come and pass, in a matter-of-fact beat. But it goes in my head all the time, to a very far-away tune. This is the funeral march of them:

πολλα τα δεινα, κουνει ανθρωπου δεινοτερον πελει

— monotonously splendid, it is the measure of these foot-falls, and the whole quiet majesty of man in death. If you do not understand, it cannot be translated. I should want a whole page to do it adequately. For there is every possible sense of *δεινος* here, far more than were ever dreamt of by “the great poet Sophocles.”

13. THE CLOTH HALL

Did you ever see the Cloth Hall of Ypres in its prime, and is it true that it gave more of an effect than the Ducal Palace at Venice? There are a few walls of it left standing now, and one smashed façade, and the sodden-

looking riven hull of what was once the tower. And you can make no more of it. A great deal is buried in its own ruins. You stand out in the expanse of the weed market-place, with almost nothing left round it but mounds of brickwork and jumbles of stone, and here and there a tottering jag of wall or gable: and you look across the emptiness, and there are the smashed bulk of the tower and the lonely line of wall behind it, with arcades of what used to be windows. Otherwise it is such a shapeless misery of wreckage that you can hardly see over to another mountain-range or more behind, which is all that is left of St. Martin's. When you have climbed up and down for a bit you do find, indeed, that the Cathedral has a piece of wall or two subsisting, and a doorway with headless statues. But the walls are almost hidden in their ruins, and the arch is so shattered that daylight shines between its blocks, and the saints threaten to descend in an avalanche at any moment. If you go inside, it is more mere mountains of débris, weed-grown and wild.

The Cathedral once had round pillars made of coal-coloured basalt, piled one upon another like a column of black draughts. And in the destruction these have all tumbled and collapsed among the heaps. They look exactly like dislocated vertebræ of some huge prehistoric, half-exposed in a face of lias, — like any scattered spine of Ichthyosaurus that you might see frozen in disorder against the cliffs of Lyme. But sometimes they have toppled quite tidily, in a slanting string; and then they look more animal than ever. It is like being in a blown-up graveyard of extinct dragons. And the whole scene is ruin — ruin absolute and irremediable.

Not all the Kaiser's horses and all the Kaiser's men could put St. Martin's or the Cloth Hall up again — nor anything else, for that matter, that they have destroyed. Do you realize that there can never be any possibility of restoring anything of all this? There is no groundwork for restoration; there is not a bone left to build on. You can patch up a hole, or put on a new roof, easily enough: but when the very skeleton has gone to pieces there is nothing any one can do any more, except clear the whole mess away and start afresh with something quite new. And that is what must happen with all these places, from the villages of the Somme to the Cloth Hall at Ypres — and it is no thanks to the Boche that we do not have to say the same of Rheims and Amiens and St. Mark's.

Arras can be restored, yes, — though not its beauties, — but of everything else a clean sweep will have to be made before anything can be done. Probably what it will end in is the complete abandonment of many of these former sites, such as the Somme villages, and the restarting of their life somewhere else close by. But the Somme villages are so completely wiped out that the problem and the trouble are simplified: it is these crowded, useless, hopeless potsherds of houses and ranges of ruin, in Ypres and Péronne and Bapaume, that will be so difficult to deal with. Restoration and rebuilding are almost entirely impossible for any house in any of these: and it would be a tax on Hercules and Cræsus combined to clear the ground and make room for a new town on the emplacement of the old! I suppose that, in the end, much of these will also be given up: I hope the Cloth Hall in particular will remain as it is, for an enduring monument and refresher, if ever our memories fade.

14. WEARINESS OF MISERY

Does it worry you that I say so often how tired one gets here? I cannot help it: one does — tired, tired, tired; till the pain of weariness becomes so unbearable that one's nerves take the remedy into their own hands, and refuse to feel anything more. In this gigantic, spectacular way one sees too much, more than one's endurance can hold. It is like the water-torture of Mme. de Brinvilliers. One is filled up to the bursting point all the time: yet cannot overflow. And so, in a way, it is almost worse for me than for the real people. For they just see their own one corner of work, and have that work to prevent them from thinking of anything except getting it carried out. Whereas I have nothing to do but go about and see the whole thing, and agonize over it in a vast, fertile distress which is like trying to cram a lakeful of tears into one medicine-glass. It is a real comfort when moments come when I need not feel overborne.

15. THÉROUANNE

For Ypres was the apex of trials: and after that things began to smile again. Even the sky cleared and became radiant as we went. We had one more sight of war, but it was an old wound, long since cicatrized. For we passed through a dull little obscure red-brick village, very quiet and humdrum and insignificant. And this is all that is left, even to-day, of the once notable town of Thérouanne, razed out of existence by that High and Mighty Prince, our own late sovereign lord King Henry the Eighth. It makes a good pendant to Ypres. For Henry the Eighth has been a bare basketful of stinking bones these three

hundred years and more: yet the harm he did persists, and the town he killed is still no better than a lethargic, obscure village like the rest. So I suppose it will be with the work of the Kaiser. And it only makes it the more odd, that Thérouanne is now a little quickened to life again by the occupation of the Portuguese, — crowds of trim figures close-fitted in grey, and with a very high general average of good looks in a dark, small style, sullen and Southern. Queen Katherine would have known them, but King Henry would certainly stare to see them here.

16. THE CEMETERY

And then we came into another town, full of our own people, where there was a cemetery that had to be visited. It lay below the town, on a sunny slope, with a big aerodome to one side: and when we had passed through the dreariness of the Catholic memorials, — how infinitely better — supposing it at all mattered — to be remembered once a year with a threepenny bunch of violets, than to be polished off callously once and for all with a metallic garland of tin palms and pansies! — we came into the new ground where our own men lie. While M. de Noère was about his business with the sacristan, I mooned mournfully up and down the serried rows, haunted with my usual horror lest I might come unexpectedly on somebody I cared for. I do not quite know why, but I certainly should dislike to be taken by surprise in that particular way.

They really are pathetic enough, anyhow, these dense, dense lines of little crosses in unbroken rows: and the neat, man-long hummocks between which you could scarcely tread. It is all raw earth, very spick and tidy, with a few

flowers planted by kind French hands: it oddly makes one think of a clean modern hospital, with lines upon lines of crowded beds all so orderly. The only relief in the monotony of crosses is where some special big one has been put up: or where some flying man is buried. For then they take the propeller of his machine, and saw off three of its arms, and plant it in the ground by the fourth. And it thus makes a rather charming whirligig-cruciform effect, though it must be a sad waste of propeller-blades. Anyhow, it is a great relief from the regulation little crosses: and there is a real beauty of appropriateness too. It carries one far away back to Circe's island, and Elpenor lying under his mound, with his oar planted on top for a memorial.

17. THE PLANES GO UP

By now the sky was without a cloud again, and all the sausages were once more watching overhead, in a linked line that dwindled away north and south into dots against the blue. The Boches got busy at them very soon, and there was a popping of Archies. In another minute there rose a booming, drumming roar, and round the corner over the hedge on the left — so close you could have thrown a stone into it — a plane came swooping upward in a slant across the foreground. It was like the swish and violent emergence of a rocket. Not thirty seconds and out there roared another, and then another: till a whole fleet of six were mounting the sky in wide gyrations, growing smaller every instant, while their pervasive boom throbbed undiminished. It was a glorious sight: I felt I was in the wings at a great play. It did not take that particular set of Boches long to start for home.

18. THE PATHS OF PEACE

We ourselves soon followed suit. And M. de Noère now had a fancy for exploring the little country roads. So off we adventured into the flaming sundown, and in a few moments were absolutely lost in the maze of a green, level country which you would have sworn was many thousands of miles away from the merest sound of war. After all those roads so crowded with traffic these small, tortuous lanes were almost uncanny in their emptiness: and when we did, on one length, meet a string of strayed lorries, the grotesqueness was redoubled. So perfect and so primeval was the green peace of the landscape. Such a long, delicious wander we made of it, in a perfect labyrinth of byways, in and out of quiet woods, and between deep hedgerows, and over hand-flat expanses of green meadow with the flare of sunset reddening the gold of the air impalpably in our eyes and darkening the masses of the trees to a dead heaviness. And everything was so hushed in utter silence and calm; even the little villages we passed, with their beautiful old crouching churches. There did not seem any life about, to say nothing of death. It was like balm on one's raw brain — except that the peacefulness of it all was so intense as to have a piercing note of irony about it.

19. THE PLANES COME HOME

At last the sun went down, and the whole sky became shrilly green in the twilight. And high up there dawned a baby moon. But still the air drummed with planes I could not see. At last I found them: in a flight of five, the

tiny black midges were soaring across the green of the sky on their homeward way. You have seen Japanese paintings of crows flighting across the face of the moon? Here you had these strange new birds repeating that very same old picture, streaming in a dark string one by one across the horns of that thin crescent, far up in the pale cold above the sobering west. Then they were descending: and at length came circling earthwards to their lair in a sombre dip of the valley on our left, by this time obscured in the night. After that vision of the homing planes, there is no more to tell you of this day, except a final theatrical vision of the Château de Noère, with its ridiculous crowd of pointed turrets profiled against the moon, and darkly reflected in the water of the moat.

Yours

R. F.

P.S. I find my marching orders. I am to go straight on to Paris. I am quite in a flutter of expectation, to think what a pleasure the contrast and change will be, after this. So here is the last letter I shall write you from Noère.

PART II
The Face of France

XIII. FRANCE

Hotel Ritz,

Place Vendôme, Paris

I. CHILL ON THE HEART

There have been delays and hitches, and here I still am. I suppose I came to Paris too raw with all I have seen. Anyhow, the sudden contrast is really horrible. I have never felt so lonely and crowded out of existence by solitude in a strange town before: I have been a thousand times less lonely on Vimy Ridge or the Butte. Of course, strange towns always have a cold face for a stranger; but a cold face turned upon a fevered mood is the worst of pains and perils. It is like coming out of a hot bath and finding only a cold stone seat to sit on. The contrast is too violatingly abrupt.

My brain and nerves have all gone wrong. I cannot sleep, and I cannot do anything slowly enough. Time has somehow swollen, and life rattles inside it. Can you understand what I mean? My brain is always some way ahead of myself. If I allow half an hour to do a thing, or go anywhere, I get the thing done in ten minutes, and then there is vacancy, with my brain drumming on ahead through it, and myself agonizing behind in the effort to catch up. It is a most odd dreadfulness, like racing onward in staggers through a nightmare, unable to stop.

But all towns are strange to strangers. What would a Frenchman, fresh from Verdun, feel, if he were turned loose

at the Ritz in London, without ever having been in the place before? You will understand that it is merely my rawness that is seeing the thing askew, because the emptiness of all this makes me so homesick for the companionship of the Somme and Thièpvail and Beaumont Hamel. And, of course, Ritzes are not places to give proper perspectives. Here you only see the luxuriousness of life: and the contrast is much more of a jar.

2. PARIS

I do wander about, and try to get better-balanced ideas. But my power of vision is gone for the moment. I see crowds and crowds of people buzzing: but they seem very much as usual, and if I told myself that they looked brave and pathetic and heroic and long-suffering, I should not really be sincere. You see numbers of widows, of course, but then so you always do in France, because the French love advertising bereavement in such a panoply of crape that a few black figures more or less hardly make any difference to the averageness of the view. As far as my own dulled observations go, then, you must take the streets of Paris as not being more remarkable now than they ever were. You would have to get into the French home and behind the scenes, to realize the war here. And who is there that can do that?

3. THE TUILERIES GARDENS

The Tuileries Gardens are the most astonishing sight. You know how patriotically abandoned and untidy our own parks have been allowed to go? Well, never have I seen more elaborate carpet-bedding than there is at this

moment in the Tuileries. Much as I hate carpet-bedding, it is even beautiful as they do it here. "Tout ce qu'il y a de plus coquet": exquisitely thought out and executed, and kept as tidy as a new pin. Asters and dahlias emerging in big tall baskets from *plates-bandes* of perillas and other such polychromatic horrors; but all the colours so perfectly placed and contrasted that the whole picture is really a fine piece of painting in plants, bold and effective, and yet with the deliberate smart elegance that is so characteristic of the French.

4. THE PLACE VENDÔME

Flowers always comfort me, even if they are only *ageratums*, which are not really flowers at all. But then I return, through the less opulent streets (where you see troops of people who really do look preoccupied and serious and thrifty), and come again into the miasma of the Place Vendôme. And it takes hold of me like a sickness. Never was there anything so blatant as those shops—the furs, the frills, the precious essences displayed singly, in tiny fine-art phials, on tables of the rarest woods; and the incredible blaze of the jewels—rows of diamonds as big as nuts in every other *étalage*, and ropes of pearls like spring onions wherever you turn. I may be overwrought about it, but these shops really are much worse than anything you will see in London. You must not and you cannot, of course, judge Paris by the *rastaquouères* who make the particular part of it their centre, and are the creators of this nauseating supply. But it *is* nauseating, none the less.

And the only suggestion of the war that you'll see there

is the grimmest bad-form joke of all — tiny gold boxes, the size of dominoes, swinging on golden chains, and bediamonded and enamelled and bepearled in the most exquisite, priceless subtleties. And all to hold your ration of two bits of sugar. Your lover sinks a year's pay in one of these monstrous absurdities, and goes off to get killed at the front, and you, meanwhile, go round swinging your little jewelled sugar-case at tea-parties, feeling patriotic.

5. TUE-LA!

The fact is that here one is back again in the atmosphere of women — the worst sort of women (I do not mean the real ones). In these rich hotels you are submerged at once in floods of feathered females, unendurable in their heartless bedizened vulgarity. Their skirts are up to their knees, and their heels are like stilts, and their hard, deliberate faces are masks of paint and powder, and they swing cascades of scents and jewels, as they mince with a stiff elaborateness up and down the corridors, trailing little obscene dogs in overcoats and boots. And then I think of the Somme and its scattered population of small, lonely graves. And I find myself wondering if it was only for *this* that men have died. Perhaps none of all this present misery would ever have happened, if we had not let our women loose to start us on this wild race for material luxury. The Oriental nations at least keep theirs shut up and out of harm's way. And they have had their reward, in avoiding — this. A day at the Ritz, in any case, writes home upon me finally that wonderful wisdom of Iphigenia (with which all decent women agree, too) — "One man's life is worth a thousand women's."

But perhaps some of even these women are being heroic behind their powder and their paint? A painted face need not necessarily mean an unpatriotic heart. But still, but still, I *cannot* believe in the alliance. "There *are* unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain, — which taste cannot tolerate, — which ridicule will seize." Frankly, I should like to take this whole pack and drown it in the cleansing sea. But, of course, these are not real Frenchwomen; they are not real at all. How very dreadful are the merely rich: and especially when women. Now you understand how, after the greatness one has seen and suffered and grown filled with, these creatures are an actual pain, and stab knives into the inflamed surface of my sensitiveness.

6. THE NECESSARY VENT

The whole atmosphere everywhere has an overchargedness. The fever of pleasure that the war has precipitated everywhere has not really anything to do with "eat-and-drink-for-to-morrow-ye-die." It is something much deeper and more important than that. It is man's incessant need to get disburdened of himself. This is always pressing upon him, anyhow: but the war has overcharged him almost to madness. Women are not like that: they are receivers, not expressers; vehicles of creation, not creators themselves, perpetually pumping out. That is why the only two women on the topmost peaks of art are Sappho and the Divine Jane — both of them expressers gone astray into a woman's body, and neither of them female in her mentality at all.

The form of expression does not matter; it may take

the shape of a book or a baby: the psychological significance is the same. That is why there is such a violent burst of minor poetry nowadays. Every man still left alive is crammed down to bursting point with emotions of which he must relieve himself or go mad. And if feathered females do not happen to be his chosen outlet, he gets his utterance achieved somehow else, in a book or a poem. The male is always hunted by his imperious, perpetual necessity of expressing the pressure of the inexpressible.

7. THE SURROUNDING DARK

And, in all this, there also emerges a real hunger for physical contacts too. More and more one hugs the thought of anything warm and human, against the pressure of the cold, gigantic void all round us. I am possessed night and day, myself, by those lines in the "Meleager" —

Τους ζώντας ἐν δραν, καθανων δὲ πᾶς ἀνὴρ
Γῆ καὶ σκία . . .

"Cling on with all your might to all the pleasant people there are in the world . . . for *afterwards*, . . .!" That is not a translation, of course, but is what the thing means to me. I go on wanting people the whole time: having a need of them. The war has brought us down on to a common bed-rock of humanity; I feel it in my bones, and how getting lost in other people is one's only remaining self-defence against getting lost in the infinite solitude of the darkness.

. . . I have just had a message that I am to start for the French Front to-morrow: so that I shall leave this behind, and send it to you with the rest. It is a relief to have done with this dangling about. But in another way I rather

dread being plunged in a new set of agitations by what I shall see out there.

(Some days later)

8. PICTURES

Either satiety or returning sanity has completely blown the froth off my brew. I have come back from the French front quite cool and calm again, without any more anguish. And yet I have still been seeing horrors and heroisms and Boche iniquities as abundant as before. But somehow the spectacle this time has been strangely de-emotionalizing; and most of the salient points of the front are crowded out of my mind by a whole series of landscape pictures.

The beauty of the country, in fact, obliterates the war. Even from the start it was beautiful, across the culture-flats round Paris, that carry me back to those round Peking. And then you come into the great woods and lovely rolling lines of forest that hold Chantilly; and there is such an abysmal peace that you cannot so much as remember the war, still less realize that it ever actually came surging this way. There was one particularly fascinating picture — a slice of wood that had been drastically cleared. And now the pale-silver trunks of the oaks and beeches stood up bare and sparse out of a sea of pale-golden mulleins, stiff and stately, like a cornfield of moonlight, with the heavy green midnight of the uncleared forest beyond for a background.

However, at last the woods ripple up into higher and higher heights, which at once do make you feel that you are coming to the ramparts of the war. But everything still has an ample, comfortable smartness; far out beyond

Compiègne the roads are avenued with apple trees showering down heaps of red and russet and golden fruit, there just to lie and rot. And it is their lying there that gives the first note of desolateness, as soon as you have seen through, behind the inimitable Frenchness of their being there at all, and so tidy and so thriving. For, of course, the fruit was not meant to fall and lie; but now there is nobody left to gather it or take advantage of it, except now and then a little girl or two, or an aged crone. But even so, everything is kempt and cosy-looking by comparison with what I've come from; and up under the lee of the hills beturreted and gabled little summer villas, gaily painted, squat in colonies among weeping willows and ornamental trees, as happy as if war were only a word. Even when you suddenly come upon that batteredness at Dreslincourt, it still seems remote and verdigrised over with antiquity.

9. DRESLINCOURT

Not, of course, that it is. Dreslincourt has been smashed out of life with shell-fire; and here we really are in a war-zone again; and up on the heights there are trenches and barbed wire, and the whole scene is stamped with Bochery. And yet it is remote: I think because all this is only an incident in the vast primeval peace of these forested hills, which nothing has really disturbed. For the war there was only quite a young kitten; it had not developed to anything like the stature of the full-grown tiger that has torn the Flanders front to tatters, and clawed the flesh clean from its bones. Here there was a Boche advance in the early days, and then for a long time a Boche

hold, and finally, quite recently, a Boche evacuation. It is astonishing to realize how long they held on here, and how little there is to show for it. Just along the hill there is a tall old mansarded château, which you can not only tell was a château, but which still is, with a roof and walls still standing.

And yet you can alight at a siding here, and go up a deep sunken lane, until you come on very definite traces of the Boche. The lane itself, of course, served very handily as a trench; and then you come, not to dug-outs, but to splendidly solid cellar-caverns built into the side, where the Boche evidently meant to make his stay immortal. They are big wide arks of corrugated iron, and above that there is an iron-girdered cement roof, as deep as doom; and earth above that, and then a layer of big stones under the turf. And they actually did stay here two years and a half. It seems so uneventful of them now, and so very long ago. And then one realizes that it was no such uneventful time for the French. But for abandoned, slothful calm there is nothing to compare with it yet on the Flanders front. You hardly feel that the fields are fallow; the slope of the hill, up to the headland and the barbed wire, is like the fall of some English park, with thorn trees standing and rough, tussocky grass. The whole scene suggests shooting rabbits, not people. I felt out of gear, as if my impressions were going to be in the wrong key throughout, because of what I had seen before I came here.

10. SAINT-QUENTIN

However, things do improve. On we went, past various rare Boches working on the road, up and down across

the swellings of that lovely low landscape of rich forests, in the loveliest colourings of darkness and russet and pale gold under a wild, windy sky, till at length we came to Noyon. And after that we really entered upon a war-zone, with the land gone fallow and vacant, the very image of an American prairie. So that the Americans who see it feel quite at home instead of getting the note of desolation. But to me it was true desolation again, though still a market-garden by comparison with the Somme. The hills and woods have faded out, too, and you career over open, dreary levels, or what seem like levels, the earlier stages of the journey. And then there is a pale white husk, dim in the distance. It is Saint-Quentin.

We did not go near; we turned away down a side road, and came ere long into a broad, shallow dip with a lovely, far view of the city, in a rolling middle distance of woodlands, blue and violet, and fields sinking to a stream-bed in the foreground. The carcass of the Cathedral towered remote and massive in the centre of the picture, bloodlessly white in a shaft of sunlight, over the crowded darkness of the houses round its feet, obscure under the shadow of a cloud. And still it was the most arcadian and unactual scene. Nothing was doing. We heard shells, and saw a very occasional burst; but all we got was an emphasized impression of calm.

II. HUBERTUS HAUS

However, the Hubertus Haus provides scope and actualities enough. It challenges comparison with the Butte, of course; but not fatally, for all its characteristics are so starkly different that it really makes a companion

picture, not a rival one. It is just such another prehistoric barrow, though, rising like a pimple on the brow of the open country, some miles beyond Saint-Quentin. Here, however, you are not haunted by holiness and heroisms; but by something very different — by something very much the reverse. For this tight little eminence is not crowned with loneliness and silence and undying dead: it merely carries a pleasure-dome of Prince Eitel Friedrich, where, in the intervals, or perhaps the crises, of battle, he retired to make merry with the peroxide blondes. This is really a log cabin — a very grotesque note in the scene, haunted only with stale lusts, and the ghosts of champagne bottles, and all the crude beastliness of the drunken Boche. It is respectabilized again now, of course, having become a French lookout post; and there is a satisfaction in thus having it made an honest woman of at last. But still the place trails its cloud of ingloriousness: it is like an ugly little old *beaulmière* who has had her sordid revels, and now sulks over her memories as she sourly sits sewing sacks in a reformatory. A small, plain place; but the plainness is not any decent simplicity. A Boche plane came over and ungratefully tried to drop bombs on it; ineffectual Archies popped and clattered, and at last the Boche went home again, well out of reach of the dark little round fluffs with which the sky abruptly blossomed.

12. THE MURDERED ORCHARDS

There is other evidence here of German Kultur — an atrocity I had read of, but never, of course, realized till I saw it in all its native hatefulness. The view is lovely, anyhow, from the verandah — out over an enormous

champaign of gentle undulations, woodland and meadow and orchard, away and away to Saint-Quentin. But here you are in the very middle of the murdered orchards, and the hurtingness of it is something quite new, even after all the rest. There, over the whole of the nearer landscape, they lie, the slaughtered trees, each of them deliberately lopped. One yearns over the time and care that were employed in doing all this; it is so thoroughly well done. And I doubt if even the Uncles, if they saw it, would dare try to excuse it as a military necessity. It is merely nauseating and abominable; if one did not corset one's self all the time into a callous calm, one would cry over those dead apple trees, lying there with such a patient look of being martyrs. For they are still trees, not only recognizable as such, but quite intact. That is what makes the horror of the sight — a thing entirely different from the blackened, half-obliterated bones of the Somme woodlands. These are like fresh-beheaded bodies, lying orderly out in rows as they fell dead. And it does not at all mitigate the pain of it, that the French have already regrafted many of them.

But all this country was the happy hunting grounds of Boche iniquity. Here, again, he has had to abandon; and where the Boche abandons, he first butchers everything within reach, like an anthropoid in a rage, pointlessly. And you feel the country hideously tired. Or rather, I did at first — tired out, filled with a vast cold languor as remote as possible from the furious vitality of Ypres. And yet I went on feeling something behind all this that is not languor, by any means, something inexorable and deliberate. Perhaps it was the contrast of the calm scene with the men

you see in it that gave me the key. They are wholly different, indeed, from our own people, — unshorn and all-over-the-place, — but they are perfectly hale, perfectly clean-eyed, ruddy and almost radiant in a quiet, set way, as completely unlike the worn-out, blanched, bloodless France that pessimists love lamenting as anything that the poor Uncles could wish to disbelieve.

13. THE SILENCE OF FRANCE

Of course, I have not got hold of their atmosphere yet; I doubt if I can, in a rather short visit; but already I have a feeling about them, not the transcendent enthusiasm that one's own people give, — perhaps because they are our own, — but a certainty of something grim with a grimness beyond passion, sedate and steady, a sitting-down-in-the-saddleness in fact, a relentlessness that is all the harder for having reached the extreme of calm, when a man bites his tongue and saves his breath for something more urgent than shouting. It is not the tiredness of the French that I feel, it is their silence. And their silence is not like ours. Ours *would* stand for exhaustion, but theirs feels as if it stood for bed-rock determination.

I think people at home forget how differently emotion works in different races. The Englishman is most deadly when he cracks a joke; but the Frenchman is most deadly when he leaves off saying anything at all. That is what neither understands about the other. Tiredness certainly is not the atmosphere of France's silence.

These people have suffered, too, and are suffering; and they are not a folk to suffer meekly and forgivingly. It is only here, somehow, that you do realize how France is

fighting on her own land, for her own land. I see Paris now with quite a different eye, and its real women, since I have seen what France and Paris are enduring. Long before ever I came out here I remember going down into Kent to stay with Agnes, and watching from the window the snug little old villages that nestle so cosily into the orcharded dips of the downs; and trying to imagine what one would feel if our own were blasted and battered by the Boche. It is only here that one does begin to get an inkling of what it would be to us and, therefore, what all this must mean to the French.

Oddly enough, Ypres and Arras and our own front are in a way ours, though not really: they are a common heritage that does not give anything quite like the intimate pang you feel for France when you come to her own front, still on her own soil, still confronting the Boche there and enduring his destructions. But when you go up on to the verandah of the Hubertus Haus, and see that enormous landscape laid bare, and in the far distance the great wooded headlands round Laon, rolling out towards the flatter lands beyond, like promontories dominating the sea, then you do personally realize what the Boche occupation is and means, and how those hills, too, are playing their part once more in guarding France. And when you go to Chauny, you begin to see, through the apparent quiet of the French, into what it stands for.

14. CHAUNY

I need hardly talk to you about Chauny. One of the people in the party thought it might be a nice place to get a cup of tea: until he got there. Chauny is simply another

Péronne — except that it is only an uglyish modern town. But like Péronne, it was evacuated by the Boche; and, as at Péronne, he cut the throat of the place coldly, and stabbed it all to pieces, before he went. It is just another wilderness of explosion and incendiarism. And even after all I had seen, and even among the emotions of the people with me, who had not previously seen anything of the sort, I must say that Chauny took me by the throat as violently as if I were still as virgin as they to the knowledge of Boche Kultur. It is the crudest, nudest, rudest of all the Boche wreckages.

When you stand in the little *place*, with the broken-up buildings all round you — the Théâtre, the Hôtel de Ville, the Palais de Justice, it is as if you were standing in a circle of abominably smashed-up, red-brick doll's-houses. The whole town is like a broken toy that some ape-child in a fury has banged and battered to flinders. It is altogether horrible, in a *morne* vulgar ugliness. You cannot talk; it holds you crushed. We went right through the lifeless, silent streets to a wrecked glassery away beyond the canal. It is all as dead and squalid as a nit. Life and its trappings were sheared through quite abruptly there: and here have stopped dead — a curtain flapping forlornly from a broken attic, a flower-pot still extant on the rim of a ruined house. The only living thing was yet another of those tragic cats that are always giving the keynote of these murdered places — a forlorn little black puss this time, squatted wild on a charred roof-beam in its devastated home, and glowering at the passers-by in an insane green stare.

15. "CONSCIENTIOUS"

Always one is being surprised at the way one's mind and emotions work out here. I did not feel intimate or involved with the destruction of Chauny, as I do with what I go on calling our own towns — Ypres, Péronne, and the rest. And yet, in the very fact of standing aloof from it, I had more pain, and a different pain, from anything I had got on our front. Perhaps it is that I saw the murder of it quite naked, without any *parti pris*, or veil of English glamour, or sense of English responsibility. Anyhow, I do see it, with a cold, terrible clearness, and it brings out of me something which I did not trust myself to think about before, because I was afraid that my feelings in Péronne and Ypres might perhaps be puffed out into emotionalism by my English consciousness there.

But here at last, quite safe and cold, you do see the full dreadfulness of standing outside this crusade of civilization — of not lending all your heart and brain and hands to making it certain that things like this cannot ever be done again. On our front, I was half afraid all the time that my anger might be coloured by a passion of patriotism; but here I see, with a clear, unbiassed certitude, the full miserableness of those wretched creatures who have let their own self-righteousness and their own selfish consciences cut them off from all share in carrying the white man's burden. The superhuman egoism of it is what so appals me; that anybody should trouble about keeping the lily-white hands of his own soul, as he thinks, clean, when there is a question of damming back this unspeakable tide of filth in which the Boche is trying to submerge the world.

I do not want to use shrill words about these people; they have their reward. They have chosen to be citizens, if they please, in a wider kingdom that is not of this world — an *imperium ex imperio* where British and Boche are as one; but they have certainly ceased to have any citizenship in England any more, or among any other race of civilized men. After seeing all this out here, the misery they have taken no share in stemming, the peace and goodwill of mankind that they have tacitly assisted the Boche in betraying, I do not see how one is ever again going to feel comfortable towards a Conscientious Objector or take his hand. So let us leave them alone. Self-righteousness is its own damnation. Their noxiousness, of course, does not excuse their persecution: but neither does their persecution mitigate their noxiousness.

I have suffered many things myself about these people in the atmosphere of the Uncles, who, of course, cherish them obstinately, and have the tables littered with all the nasty little queribund books that whimper over the "martyrdom" of some brave hero who either would or would not put his breeches on, or take them off, at the behest of some brutal commanding officer. But I used to wonder then if perhaps my own anger might not be tinged with annoyance and mere contradictiousness. "Hard it is," said the Buddha, "to put up with folly"; and it is always a nice point, when the folly is poisonous, whether one's anger at it is really only single-hearted indignation, or tainted with personal ill-temper as well. But now I certainly do know that all I felt was honest and right; and only a faint foretaste of what the lessons of the fighting front have made me feel in the last weeks. It was obviously not conceivable,

for instance, that Ambrose and Egidia should be asked to Simonstone; but at the time I could not quite understand the full extent of my repulsion from the idea. And now I know. People who deny responsibilities cannot claim amenities: they are pariahs by their own pleasure. Their tragedy is the most terrible thing that even selfishness has ever wrought upon itself.

16. THE AISNE

What you get in Rheims is something wholly different. Even the country on the way to it is different. The country grows lovelier and lovelier — vast rolling volumes of wooded hills. And then we came into the valley of the Aisne. There were still the velvety masses of forest on either side, but down in the dip the river vale is a brown sedgy moorland like the Somme, with inexplicable tangles of barbed wire rusting among the thistles. But there are no signs of dead anywhere, and nothing like the impression of battle that haunts the Somme, because the artillery fight had not developed in the days of the Aisne, so that the woodlands remain intact. As for the dead, I suppose they have been taken elsewhere.

17. LAISSER-ALLER

These roads are a violent contrast to some of the others. No cold languor here. For they are crowded all along with military life and movement, camps and lorries and men. And the whole thing feels somehow so unlike our front. There is a curious easiness in the air. I cannot define it, and I dare say it may not be true; but I do feel that French discipline and order are not the same things

as ours. Every race evolves what it needs, of course, — which is why it is such folly to try and *copy* Germany or Japan or anybody else, — and I seemed to feel the French spirit much more personal and individual than the huge depersonalized unity of our own army. You do not get anything like the same impression of beautiful order, the mechanism of forethought, in every department, the cult of tidiness as a thing lovely in itself, and priceless in war. For instance, the moment that an English army pitches its tents anywhere, the whole landscape blossoms out with an uncanny immediateness into multitudes of little veiled shrines. Whereas, in France of the French, you see nothing of this, and everybody goes as he pleases.

18. RHEIMS

Round the hulk of ruined Soissons Cathedral we passed, to avoid the moving multitudes; and on to Jonchery-sur-Vesle. And after that the hills grow gradually less high and less massively wooded. Over the lowering ranges you have all the time the feeling of coming down, down, towards some brow from which you will suddenly find yourself looking out over the sea. It is, in fact, the open country into which you are descending, ridge over shallower ridge, with the roads screened by matting against Boche observation. And then, in a few more minutes, away in the distance, like the pricked ears of a rabbit over a rise, you see the twin towers of Rheims Cathedral.

Now, Heaven on high forbid that I should do an Emily Hobhouse. But after Ypres and Arras, Bapaume and Péronne, my first remark about Rheims might also be that it is a well-preserved metropolis. Of course, I must not

exaggerate. Rheims *has* been hammered, and is being still hammered sporadically all the time. But, if you have already seen Arras, Rheims shows you nothing worse in the same line. It is not even as bad. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. There is still a civilian population in Rheims. It lives very coyly, of course, in cellars and basements; but still it does live there. But I would thank you to find a civilian population in Arras! Why, Rheims still contains a cardinal-archbishop. You would look a very long while in Ypres or Arras before you came on even a resident curé — let alone a cardinal! The fact is, that Rheims comes rather as a bathos after the other ruined towns; and the more so in that it has been so copiously advertised. After what one has seen of the other places and read of this, one expected so very much that one was bound, I suppose, to be disappointed.

19. THE CATHEDRAL

In the first place, there is the Cathedral. There it still so perfectly and entirely is, by comparison with what one had feared to see. And one had agonized for so long over the "Destruction of Rheims Cathedral" that when one's own eyes find that it has not really been destroyed at all, one swings into such a reaction of angry relief that at first one does not notice that in point of fact the great church has suffered terrible damage. It is, indeed, nothing but a skeleton. Every scrap of glass is gone, and every splinter of woodwork. It is swept completely stark and bare. But the bony structure is still practically intact, and, after all the lamentation, it comes almost as a shock to find the Cathedral still so very much all there.

The peril of overstating things is that when you see the real truth it comes on you as a bathos, and you underrate it even at that. Moreover, had journalists, instead of hec- tically exaggerating, concentrated themselves on what the Boche really *did* do to Rheims, they had in their hands one of the very heaviest indictments that civil art has to bring against him. For, though he did not succeed in destroying the Cathedral, he did quite callously and deliberately and cold-bloodedly try to. Again and again and again, indefatigably and merely maliciously, he sent his great shells into the very centre of the Cathedral, through the vault over the high altar, in obviously no other aim than to bring down the whole structure. So that he has all the guilt of intention, if not of achievement.

Only that magnificent masonry baffled him. The vault is gone, and the high altar buried under mountains of débris, and the broken bundles of the pillars stagger up nakedly into the sky. But that is substantially all the damage that the structure of the Cathedral has had. It is only a matter of reroofing the vault, patching up the roof, and restoring the woodwork windows and the pews. Bad enough, in all conscience — but not by any means ruin. Even of the great carved portals only one has seriously suffered, and that only by the burning of the French scaffolding that was swarming up that tower when the firing set it alight. Perhaps the interior has even gained by being swept clear of the baroque ugliness that disfigured it; while of the lovely capitals of the columns all down the nave there is not one that has suffered so much as a scratch. You can still see, by the débris of an altar before which Charles X was crowned, how terrible that particular redecoration must

formerly have been. Now it is all clean gone: there are quantities of old folk down the nave busy on the despairful task of fitting together the flinders of glass again, on strips of canvas, indifferent as to whether another Boche shell may not come plunging through the roof upon them: otherwise the place is perfectly bare, but for some terrible pictures, and the wreckage of the altar, and a legendary stance of St. Joan, a canopied stall of shrill green, powdered with golden fleur-de-lis, close to which hangs a very unpleasant crucifix. One arm has been torn away, and Jesus has swung outward, suspended only by the other, seeming to be drooping off the cross in a complete collapse of anguish.

20. ST. JOAN

The little *place* in front of the Cathedral has been battered with shell-fire, and is now completely shuttered and dead. But it is a Place Vendôme, anyhow, as compared to the Grande Place at Arras. Immediately in front of the Cathedral, plump and indefatigable, St. Joan prances upon her steed, with flowers giving a touch of life on either side. And St. Joan is quite untouched. The pious find a miracle here: the sensible murmur that if a miracle were in question, how much better to have kept the Cathedral scatheless, than to waste protection on an ugly neo-Catholic statue. However, miracles are rather at a discount here, for just across the *place* there is a Palais de Justice, new and bald, and blatant, in the most terrible and the most perfectly Boche style of New-Art hideousness, brutal, white, uncompromising. And whether the Boche shells recognized it as a spiritual cousin or not I cannot say: anyhow, it still

stands almost virgin of their damage, a miraculous but deplorable survival, cheek by jowl with the sad, splendid frontage of the Cathedral, hacked and hammered into a dark, gaunt ghost, with the great rose-window gone to nothing but a twisted mesh of lead-work, like a skeletonized leaf in the winter. Evidently the miracle has gone astray, and St. Joan's new honours must have usurped her attention.

21. THE FRONT LINES

One may write poems and sentiments in an album kept in the Cathedral by the cardinal-archbishop: and then one can go and take lunch in the only restaurant which is still open to custom. I should like to see any one doing as much in Ypres! And then there are the cellars where the people live, with the gloomy drumming of the Boche shelling going on overhead. I also went out to the front lines, away over rain-veiled flats beyond Betheny. You have to take to the trench at once, for fear of the Boche fire. And on such a day the trench is a mere troughful of watered milk. The French have not risen here to duck-walks, so that you have to adopt the duck's more characteristic gait, and waddle as best you can in the glairy slime, slithering in crazy acrobatics astraddle from bank to bank, or splashing doggedly down the successive lengths of lake. It is a dreary business, and gives you a very lively feeling of how the Real People must love life in the trenches through autumn and winter. And these particular trenches certainly have not the clean-cut spick-and-spanness of those of ours that I went through. They seem a trifle doleful and unkempt and crumbling.

Then you get to headquarters, and find the usual delightful people, living snug in ark-roofed dug-outs. There is an easiness of individual give-and-take here that does not in the least seem to damage authority, a sort of paternal-fraternal relationship all round which is very cordial. But how much of it does one really see? Anyhow, that is the impression one gathers by listening and watching. It is as if *égalité* were, indeed, a living inspiration here. And yet you can never have *égalité* unless you are all sovereigns or all slaves; I suppose the French are all slaves of one ideal together, and therefore all sovereigns of their fate. That sounds elaborate, but it really is what you feel in the atmosphere of these equanimous, quietly genial people, with their clear, grey eyes in their broad, rosy faces, like so many well-kept tomcats, sleek and well-liking, with their very whiskers wiry with vitality. These are not good moments to remember that some people call France exhausted.

The front line is never gay, I am sure, — certainly never at any moment when you are likely to be allowed in' it. You go hide-and-seeking among the husks of a ruined village, and then along and along the blinding mazes of those trenches, till there you are; and down you can go into a dug-out, to peer through a periscope at nothing whatever but a strip of wire and moorland some five hundred yards across, to where the Boche lies invisibly imbedded. And behind that the long flats of the country and its farthest undulations fade out drearily in the rain. It is a dismal, empty scene, and said even less to me than it did before on our own front. There was nothing doing, and it did not seem as if there ever could be. And so, in due course, and after many divagations and losings of ourselves, we got back to

the road once more, and into the safety of the matted screens that all over this country prevent the Boche from too closely observing what traffic may be passing on the French lines.

22. THE WAY HOME

All the journeys in those parts are very beautiful. I could not really think of anything else, when I returned from Rheims to Paris. The way goes up and down among the wooded hills and rises of Champagne: and then round a shoulder, and over on to a vast undulating fell-face, all of amber-coloured vineyards, with Épernay lying far below, in the golden vale of the Marne. Gradually you come down to it, round successive swellings of the hillside; and after Épernay gradually the apple comes to dispute the supremacy of the vine more and more. Until at last, in the twilight, the valley has become one orcharded sward, with dim high volumes of woodland impending indistinguishably overhead on either side. After that we were soon in the black dark, and everything went wrong, and the lights died out, and we lost our way, and altogether it was far more fun than anything that had yet happened in these days, front trenches or no front trenches. It was the most uncanny, baffling experience, lumbering blindly and periculously along through the cold, blank night, on local roads patently unknown to all concerned, that zigzagged over open flats and through woods, but seemed to be traversing a country of the silent dead. For never was there a house or any sign of life. Nor ever a sound: the rare villages we traversed might have been as dead as Thièpvail. It seemed a Rip Van Winkle's age before at last we found ourselves

incredibly snailing through the darkened suburbs of Paris, long after we had begun to despair of dinners, beds, or any kind of brightness ever again.

And now, I suppose, I am for Italy at any moment. Agitations and arrangements are still in process: but the moment they subside into satisfactoriness I shall start. I cannot tell you the comfort I have had in getting steadied down by the French front. Now I shall take pacified nerves and a calm pulse with me to Italy. And good nights again, I hope. But why has all this just inspired me to a placid exaltation, instead of the hubble-bubble of storms that possessed me before on our own?

Yours

R. F.

PART III
The Call of Italy

XIV. UDINE, GORIZIA, AND THE CARSO

Comando Supremo, Udine, Italy

October 17, 1917

1. THE JOURNEY

I found your letters when I arrived. Very well; I *will* date my own henceforward. Perhaps it will be best anyhow, as I can already feel I am going to see a great deal here, and in quite a short time, so that the record can only be a glorified diary.

I had a hard time getting here. But "there's few things as can't be bore with, if took patient"; and among those we must now reckon Continental travelling in war-time. All the trains are slow and late, and their connections lost; one must never expect to arrive at a place until one has actually got there. China turns out to have been an invaluable training for modern conditions of transit.

2. ITALIAN WOMEN

The journey was blank and long and crowded. I did manage to get a seat, but from Milan to Mestre I could never keep it, because of the crowds of women that filled the trains. They were a new revelation in women, though, that kept me quite glad to be at their service. They had not the wiry strenuousness of the Englishwoman who is doing work, or the calculating, hard-eyedness of the French one; still less the emphatic odiousness of such women in every country as are not really doing anything. Their expression shows the decent, self-collected calm of courage; and they

are soberly dressed, with the family fortunes hanging at their ears in large diamonds. Their only weakness is for huge hats, between the brims of which you have to sidle and slink like a row-boat threading the Symplegades. One of them was of another type, strayed in through stress of crowds elsewhere, — an elderly matron of the country, in stiff black silk, with a black silk tablecloth folded square on her head, and long, Roman-looking golden earrings of filigree, and a stately, severe old Roman face, ruddy and hard and monumental. She might have been Justinian's uncompromising aunt.

3. FRONT LINES AT HOME

And they all had a look of enduring, which made me for the first time do justice to the aching burden a woman does have to carry in the war. She has to bear the whole dreadfulness of it, indeed (except its physical horror) without any of its excitement or rewards. Her form of fighting is, perhaps, the most glorious of all, because it is the least glorious; merely to sit quiet and be passively heroic, without any chance of working off her nerves in a splash of activity; to keep cheerful, and to keep what is left of her home cheerful, against a rising tide of prices and difficulties the whole time, and her own personal private anxieties preying perpetually on her day and night, in the anguish of her utter impotence to hinder or alter. I do not wonder if women grow tired and depressed at times.

4. PASSING GARDA

Passing Desenzano and Verona was almost a pain. There was cloud-capped Baldo, the same as ever; and op-

posite, up the distance, the masses of the Tombea, characteristically dark in storm; and the vast expanses of the lake, dwindling up between them towards Riva. The hills were blue and violet, and the lake was of a steely dulness, blackening upwards towards its topmost rim. And it was my first sight into real Boche territory. It seemed so strange thus openly to be staring straight into the strongholds of the enemy. You could even see those cliffs over the lake where the Ponale Strasse goes wriggling in and out of the precipices.

5. UDINE

The journey was endless after this. It was not till midnight that I arrived here. Udine is a fascinating little old town, pure Venetian, with deep arcaded streets, and a beautiful *municipio* (on the lines of the Doge's Palace) and a cathedral and a *castello* perched upon a citadel in the middle. At night it is pitch-dark; you grope blindly along the blackness of the arcades, emphasized every few hundred yards by a tiny electric blur of turquoise blue, or sapphire, or purple. The effect is perfectly theatrical; when you get into the *piazza* it seems like the set scene in the beginning of a pantomime. There is nothing but a dark, attentive silence, and the masses of heavy buildings, flat and vague and high, shutting you in; and the dim little azure stars of the lamps. You expect at every moment that the lights will be turned up, and the orchestra start braying beneath your feet, and strings of fairies come dancing on round every corner.

Udine has all the charms inseparable from a town of the Venetian or Lombard plain — gardens with persimmons in

them, and the invariable fruit market, with crowds of *contadine*, and stalls, and umbrellas pitched, and overflowing piles of apples and pears and chestnuts. It is the very perfection of sunlit Southern peacefulness; and after the North the air is soft in the throat like milk. And then there is a dinning and a drumming and a buzz. People run out of their shops and their *caffés* in tumultuous throngs; and nobody sees anything; and after a while you all go back and resume your lunch. But there has been a Boche plane over the town; and, though they are always driven away, they are always liable to come again at any moment.

6. ITS VIEW

From the castello you get a very good idea of the whole lie of the land. The slopes are a public garden, with very steep winding paths and seats and rock-works. And on the top there now is only a church and a hospital. Into these you cannot go, but, on the way, each coil of the climb gives you a noble view. Here is Udine lying mapped out, and then a rich expanse of plain, spread with vines, and plummy with poplars into the distance; and then, all round the north, at twelve miles distance or so, the great wall of the Julian Alps goes sweeping in a stiff semicircle, far out into the East, where you see little promontories of hillocks running farther forward; and beyond them the low long lines of the Carso, stretching down to the sea. The gulf itself you do not get a sight of from here, of course; but, indeed, that hugeness of the plain might just as well be the sea; it is a real *æquor*, with a landward fringe, under the mountains, of pinnacled wooded islands.

Nor do you see the actual fighting front from here; it lies away out to the east, round the corner of the crescent, where the Isonzo comes down from behind, in a backward break of the range. The *cirque* that embraces Udine has its own breaks, and here and there you see higher, wilder masses appearing behind in the intervals; and it is not a splendid compilation of peaks, but merely a severe, serrated wall, with corrugated abrupt bare faces, streaked with scree and early snow in the gullies. At its feet flow the undulations of the wooded foothills, mounting up above the plain; the whole scene is so exactly like looking across the flats of northern China to the first mountain-walls of Tibet, that all the time I am thinking that the end of my day's stage will be somewhere over there, in that gap of the range, and that I ought to be seeing the mules winding in procession below me, and that it is really time I got going myself.

7. CELESTIAL ACTIVITIES

Udine is full of people, and all the normal business is going on, only doubled and trebled and complicated by multitudes of soldiers, and the *Comando Supremo*, and the various Allied Missions. In fact Udine is more alive now than it ever has been, and is driving more of a trade than it ever dreamt of. It has been dragged out of the immemorial lethargy of an obscure country town, and turned into one of the most humming ganglions of activity in Italy. The ebullience of things seems almost too much for the placid setting: and both worlds are stirred to an unaccustomed business. One in particular of the churches seems to have special powers, and has long been plastered from wall to

ceiling with *ex voto* pictures of miraculous rescues, people toppling out of carriages and off cliffs, up to any date you please in the early eighteenth century. You can imagine the archaic, naïf delightfulness of them, the stiff coifs and wooden faces and limbs, the preposterous prancing horses and cast-iron bundles of flames out of wooden houses like dog-kennels. And then, among these, — the older ones are gradually crowded higher and higher towards the ceiling, till at last they are skyed, — it makes you start to find quite modern ones, brand-new ones in exactly the same style of art, — prone lay-figures in front of a gun, with handsome curly smoke as solid as a prize fleece; and still the same old ascriptions of preservation to saints, and Madonna sitting up in the corner. In fact, among the pious, the saints have had as great an extension of activities, thanks to the war, as many a mundane class of workers. St. Barbara has gone into munitions, and presides over the perils of artillery and powder; St. Christopher has taken on the task of traffic-controller; and, of all improbable people, St. George is President of Air Control. You wear medals of these benevolent powers, and if they preserve you intact, you put up a tablet in church to say so; and, if they don't, you're not in a position to say anything further about it. So that they always have the best of it anyhow.

8. THE DUOMO

The cathedral is a huge, stately place, now undergoing repair. It has a lovely little old Gothic over-portal, but inside (like almost every church in Italy, I suppose) it has been terribly Berninized, ceiled and frescoed with sprawling *amorini* and baskets of fruit. The chancel is

potentially screened from the nave by vault-high curtains of stucco, immortally frozen in voluminous folds of pale mauve, and with painted golden cords and tassels, in pretence of looping them back.

The high altar is pleasant, too. It is like a marble sideboard, and under it a large old Bishop with a crumpled, fleshy face is trying to get up, much impeded by the towering height of his mitre, even if his position were not sufficiently cramped and unpropitious, anyhow. The effort has soured him; with an expression of just but querulous propriety he is whacking away a podgy *amorino* with his crozier, while another stands by unfolding an inscription. And behind this altar, back to back, there is a very old sarcophagus of marble, carved with martyrdoms in a rude Gothic style. A tyrant presides; and a plump, naked saint is on all fours being birched, turning back over his shoulder a face of annoyed astonishment.

As for food, one gets it here in one of the *caffès*. They are all bad, and the food itself dull and poor and plain, and none too much of it; so that if you are late all the less unchoice morsels are gone. But of pinch or privation there is no evident trace. And lunch, of course, one has out on the field. I thought my weather-luck was going to break when I woke to a day of inexorable level greyness and deluges. However, off we duly set, and down over the streaming distances of the plain. We just huddled close; there was nothing to see except wetness and draggled villages, and endless rows and rows of vines in the grassy fields, not grown low and gnarled and pollarded and independent, but sprawling up into orchard-rows of trees and then spraying out far and wide in a flounce of wild arms.

9. CORMONS

The direction practically subtends the arc of the mountains; you leave Udine far away up in the west behind you, and come at last to the horn of the crescent, and round it, passing first among the piled hill-islands of woodland that swim out from the feet of the mountains into the plain. Cormons lies under one of them, the most conspicuous mass; and it will not illuminate you much if I say that it took me back to many a coppiced hill in north Szechuan, feathered here and there with pines above the scrub in the same way. When you turn the corner, you begin to see up into the head of the Isonzo-Vippaco plain, where the two rivers debouch upon the open country, from among mountain masses up behind, with the purplish lines of the Carso enclosing it all down its far side to the sea.

It is green and rich and very lovely, but hardly have you turned the corner than you come into the war. At once the roads are heavily muffled, not only with high matted screens on either side (and the growing vines and brambles clamber up to assist the matting with their tangles), but also with transverse valances all along, at intervals of some ten yards or so, overhead across the road from side to side. And so one realizes that all those highlands towards which we are looking are still Boche, and this whole country still open to their observation and their fire.

10. PODGORA

The villages round that corner show you how effectively. Lucinigo and the rest are battered hulks now — nothing as compared with the ruinations of the Somme, and

nothing as compared with even the hammerings on the French front, but yet lifeless and smashed into holes with shell-fire, with all their inhabitants gone elsewhere. Immediately above is the sharp little wooded peak of Podgora, with other pinnacles of coppice mounting up and up behind it to the hills. Podgora is of a curious hot red-brown — a colour I had not seen anywhere else before. And this is the result of shell-fire on the scrub. Nothing here was big enough to be blown to nothing and left in blackened spars like the Somme woods, but the *macchia* and little trees have been burnt and charred to this furious rust-colour, in the time of the first Italian rush. To this day there is a specially princely pill-box of cement upon a point up there, to which the King of Italy ascends when he wishes to take a view of what his men are achieving at the valley-head and on the mountains that threaten it.

II. GORIZIA

All these villages are heavy, solid Italian buildings, very different from the red-brick bourgeois ugliness in France. They are all dead and desolate now; but dead in a stately, unprotesting protest like that of Arras, not shrill and dishevelled and middle-class. One after another they died, under the lee of the hills, with the highlands of war looming up ahead higher and higher as you advance, wilder and more tumbled, heavy in rich blue and purple under the clouds, except where you can already see that shell-fire has blasted them brown. You have some ado to catch your glimpses of them between the valances of matting overhead, that mask the view from us as effectively as they mask us from the unguessed perils in the fastnesses of

the view. And so we gradually came into the wide head of the valley, and found ourselves crossing the greyness of the Isonzo, over a new military bridge, with the relics of an old one, and pontoons, pricking up in the rapids lower down. Then we were soon in straggling boskets of suburbs, ups and downs, with villas and gardens sprawling luxuriously here and there. And it is Gorizia.

Gorizia, it seems, was an Austrian Bath or Cheltenham, a pleasure town in the South to which, when their time was done, all the old retired admirals and generals retreated to enjoy their diminished incomes in peace, assisted by their own Mrs. Rushworths and Rebecca Lady Crawleys. Even the very bed I sleep in at Udine, and the very sheets I do it in, are spoil from the Coronini Villa here; and thus solve the riddle of the coronets with which they bristle. Long may it be before they are reclaimed, or before any Austrian again lays head in Gorizia!

Even now the place is full of a kind of pensioner placidity, though shells come plunging in sporadically all the time from the various heights, and the silken air is never silent. And yet, whether the Austrians cherish fantastic hopes of reconquering it some day if they can get the Germans to help them, I do not know; but the fact is clear that, though they do go on methodically shelling Gorizia, it has certainly never been punished by either side to anything like the tune of Rheims, to say nothing of Arras, and still less of Ypres.

12. THE AUSTRIAN BOCHE

It does not do to say this to the Italians; they cannot admit that the Austrian is any less detestable in his

behaviour than the full-blooded Boche. Of course, they have good reason. Italy has always been the blind spot on the Austrian's retina. Like the Turk, he may be a decent fellow all round, but where the Italian is concerned, and the Armenian, both those decent races suddenly develop a peculiar intensity of indecency. It does show a march in civilization, that it is now more than three hundred years since England began to lose that very same attitude of mind toward the Irish. Austrians and Turks do not even treat their subject races like cattle — which is bad — but like vermin — which is worse.

No place I have been in yet is so open to hostile fire from all round as Gorizia. If you can imagine Cannes plucked up and carried away from the sea, and replanted right behind, at the Saut du Loup, among the feet of the mountains, you will get some idea of how Gorizia lies and what it is. So that it is a miracle of either luck or design that the whole place is not a ruin. But when you come into the heart of the town, the deep, dark streets are hardly more dead than a Riviera *ville de luxe* in summer; the shops are all shut, or nearly all, and some of the frontages are damaged, but to the first glance there does not seem desolation. "Lord!" I heard a woman say, seeing us agape at one shattered wall, "is there nothing better for these foreigners to come here and look at than *that*?"

Deviously we proceeded in the shade of the streets, and gradually destruction began to dawn on us. We passed round under the citadel on which the castle stands, and proceeded down a big broad avenue that had evidently been a centre of fashionable life. It is very dreary now, with the houses shuttered, and battered, and decay and

damage everywhere, and the one caffè that still subsists had had all its windows exploded by a shell the day before. In a side street off this we took our lunch with a group of officers, in a commandeered villa, while a new battery somewhere near by kept on blaring out flights of provocative shells in a shattering succession of explosions that shook the house and startled the morsels from one's fork each time.

13. CORRUPTION BY CUTLET

Of course, you cannot judge an army or a nation from a knot of pleasant people who have given you lunch. That would be corruption by cutlet. At the same time that hour of intercourse did show me something quite new, and joined on to the curious, unexpected impression I had had all along the line, coming out across northern Italy — the impression of being at home. The people here are so fair, in the first place, so much the same as ourselves in facial type and complexion, that one is always being shocked by surprise.

The organ-grinder is our type Italian of convention; and here are all these people, big and rosy and fair, invariably with grey-blue eyes and nondescript hair like the typical Englishman. I expect I told you how the French seemed to me so astonishingly large and fair, on an average; but never for a moment did I lose the feeling of being quite definitely a stranger among them. The Italians are not any fairer, really, I suppose: yet never have I had that feeling here at all. The whole atmosphere seems different.

14. OUR KINSHIP IN ITALY

Perhaps the key to this lies in the fact that this is northern Italy, — Italy of the Goths and Lombards, — the Italy, therefore, that has a dominant Teuton strain in common with ourselves; whereas what we have in common with the French is only a thin Norman streak, by this time almost diluted out of all flavour. Also, France may challenge admiration, but I rather feel that she defies affection. She is shut up in her pride; she will tolerate acquaintance, but she shies from friendship.

15. THE CASTELLO

After lunch we got into the motor once more, and went back into the town, and climbed the precipitous, winding ascent to the castello. It was still pouring deluges; we slopped and waddled up as best we could in ditches and trenches to the outer enceinte, which is a little town to itself, huddling on the acropolis. And at every point, of course, you are open to Austrian observation all round and Austrian fire. Hence the dodging and the trenches. And then you pass up, under a huge solid gate with towers, into the actual enclosure of the castle. Here are yet more houses, and shops, climbing up still to the central donjon. Round among its platforms and bastions and outworks trenches zigzag, deep in the long grass, connecting the various observation-posts. Shells are booming the whole time, and the huge old round towers have here and there been smashed. But the trees on the platform are still tall and well furnished, and the dank, cyclopean walls, festooned in campanulas and pink snapdragons, are compara-

tively undamaged. And, if you go into one of the observation-posts, you command the whole view, and understand the whole position of Gorizia, and the Italians and the Boches.

16. ITS VIEW

I wonder if I can at all convey it to you? To say you are up in a semicircle of hills only gives the very roughest notion; things are not by any means so simple and tidy as that. Away back to the left you see the deadly little pinnacle of Podgora in the far distance, and then the foothills ruffling nearer and nearer, higher and higher, till almost overhead they culminate in Sabotino under the yet higher, darker peak of Santo behind. Sabotino, seen from here, end-on, is a sharp pyramid; really it is the conclusion of a long, sharp *arête*, sweeping down from the main line of the Julian Alps, of which, as seen from Udine, you may take Sabotino as the last point of the crescent. And Sabotino and the shouldering fells in front of it especially, are bright-brown with fire, blasted and blistered. The whole of the ground is Italian now; you can see where the Austrian defence lines once ran. And the hills and the lines and the blackened furze of the barbed wire come tumbling down in a chaos towards Gorizia. The old admirals must have had charming drives in the good Austrian days, up among these umbrageous convolutions, luxuriant with vine and chestnut and beech.

Then, to this side of Sabotino, there is a deep, abrupt cleavage. Deep, deep, in its narrow gorges comes brawling the Isonzo, grey as ice, down upon Gorizia in a fierce right-angled bend enforced by the ridge of Sabotino which the

river has to circumvent in a bold jut. And equally steep on its other side, and far higher, goes soaring the ruined peak of Monte Santo, appearing to Gorizia well over the summit of Sabotino, with the browned lower pyramid of San Gabriele in front, and the stumbling cliff of Santa Caterina in front at the foot of that, down upon Salcano in the delta of the gorge. Monte Santo you are also seeing more or less end-on: in reality it is the final apex of the long spine of peaks that hedges the Bainsizza Plateau, and thence falls almost sheer and very far to the gorges of the Isonzo, all the way up to Canale and Tolmino.

17. THE TERNOVANER WALD

But another and a very much vaster highland converges towards Santo, overpowering the middle of the view: the Sella di Dol is the link between the two, with the small pyramids of San Gabriele and San Daniele to hold it up. The Ternovaner Wald is the biggest and noblest of the three great highlands that make the mountain masses at the head of the valley round Gorizia. The first is the Bainsizza, separated from the next by the dip of Dol and the Concha di Gargaro, and the deep, narrow cutting of the Cepovaner Thal: then comes the Ternovaner Wald, swelling vastly up over Gorizia, in steeps and scarps and scurfy little white cliffs, till it attains its lofty level, dark with woods and scattered with microscopic white villages; behind which it rolls away and away, to culminate at the back in a tossed dark blue-and-purple sea of wooded peaks. And along from Gorizia eastward it falls away at a slant very grandly, in gleaming limestone precipices, to the shallow green vale of the Upper Vipacco, on the far side of which there rises the third highland, which is the

Carso, flowing away in long undulations all down the whole of the right-hand distance to the sea, far out, overshadowing the bed of the Vippaco under its lee. Each one of these highlands has a hedge of shallow peaks along one rim; they look as if they had been there all the time, but as if Titans had then come by and dug the valleys, throwing up the soil from the trench into a rough ridge down one side of each.

Have I shown you so much that you cannot see anything? There is still more. These masses do not come down so close as to throttle Gorizia. There is leisurely land in between, ups and downs and dips and tumbles of prettily wooded sylvan scenery, with eminences and ridges like islands standing up from the plain. On the end of one of them is a huge shattered building among what once were woods. There lies a King of France, and that dreary, terror-frozen Mme. d'Angoulême, his niece. It is the monastery of Castagnavizza, where Charles X ended his disastrous days, and is buried. But, indeed, all this intervening country of dells and dingles is full of pleasure-houses nestling under the wooded ridges.

The whole of this is one incessant scene of war. Not only have all the villas been abandoned and smashed, and all the woods blackened and burned and browned, but the work is still going on. This may be a dead season on the Italian front, as they tell me; but anyhow shells and shrapnel are so unresting, that unless you were told the contrary you would think the war was quite sufficiently lively here. And almost everything you can see is Austrian, even down to the little fire-blasted brown ridge of San Marco, close upon Gorizia in the foreground on your right, cuddling

little dells in its dips, of which the most charming of all is called the Rosenthal. Now it is bright rust-colour, except where it is black; and the shells of San Marco come lobbing constantly into Gorizia, as easily as throwing an egg into a basket a yard away.

18. THE PRESENT LINES

All the left-hand view, of course, is Italian, from far-away Podgora behind to the peak of Sabotino. And the Italians are across on the other side of the Isonzo, on Santo, and even lower, only just beneath the summit of San Gabriele. But the rest is Austrian. Gorizia lies at the mercy of the Ternovaner Wald: you see the great white Austrian road slanting up its flank, and white Austrian villages in level lines along its high flats up above, against the dark, furry line of the forests on the peaks at the back. From the Ternovaner Wald the enemy trenches slope across the Sella di Dol, and hold the pyramid of San Daniele, and the apex of San Gabriele, and thence, under the very nose of Santo, climb down the cliff of Santa Caterina, and dominate Salcano in the mouth of the Isonzo gorge.

19. THE FALLACY OF CAPTURES

When you read of captures, you imagine that they imply secure possession and occupation. At least I did. Now that I have been in Gorizia I begin to understand that there are arcana in strategy, and that evacuation and surrender need not by any means leave the other side with any permanent victory, or any victory at all except a nominal one to put in the papers. But, of course, from

Santo, the Italians can make it uncomfortable for San Gabriele and San Daniele and even the Ternovaner; the layman must not pretend to understand the ins and outs of these things, and all the considerations involved. No doubt the Italians with their next push will sweep the minor holds, and probably the Ternovaner too; meanwhile I can only say that for the moment I should consider Gorizia no suitable rest-cure for Aunt Bethia.

20. RUBBIA

In the wet air we could see the whole wonderful view admirably: Sabotino and Santo loomed up almost black into the dark, and the Ternovaner frowned magnificent in rich clear lights of green and blue and purple; and meanwhile a number of shells kept passing to and fro, with deafening crashes reverberating in the castello itself, and vast echoes round the walls and the mountains, indefinitely prolonging the detestable splendour of the sound. But at length we descended, and resumed the car and proceeded eastward out of Gorizia, across the plain towards the Carso. The road zigzags over the green flats; it is all heavily screened with matting, and of course is shelled on occasion. But they say that neither side is anxious to waste ammunition at present, and that most of the shelling is kept for killing off advances. I can only suppose the constant firing that does go on is merely "*pour faire acte de présence.*" Anyhow, no shell came nigh the car, and in due course we passed through Rubbia, and across the Vippaco, running close under the flank of the Carso. Just across the bridge there is a beautiful old castle, the usual conventional tall square box, with a square tower at each

corner. It is in the shadow of the wooded fell, with only a little space of walled garden to stand in. And it has its romance. It was gambled for and lost and won in a night. You would not gamble for it now; the frontage is smashed, and the faces of the towers blown away, and the torn-down ivy hangs in flopping, forlorn curtains.

After this we went coiling up towards the coppiced folds of the Carso itself. By this time the day was fairing, and the country was lovely in moist dark-blue and green lights over the hills and vales, away up to Gorizia, which lay in a faint white peppering of houses among the wooded ripples; and behind it, more splendid than ever, the dreadful mass of the Ternovaner, seen now at a slant, with its long flank of limestone scarps sinking away in steepes of gleaming lilac to the upper valley of the Vipacco, and its rearmost ruffle of hills now almost indigo in the intensity of their colouring.

21. SAN GRADO DI MERNA

We got out under a hillock to climb up to San Grado di Merna. San Grado di Merna was once a big church that perched on a sharp little pinnacle tucked in under the Carso. It is now nothing but a battered pile of ruins; but observation-posts lurk in its bowels. You can look out ahead of you to the rib descending from the Carso, barely a few hundred yards ahead. The shoulder is all burnt bare and black, and there is a blacker and browner streak zig-zagging down. It is the Italian front line, slanting in the dip of the slope. Thence you can follow it away to the left out across the vivid green of the Vipacco Plain, following the line of the river by Verboia: and so, away towards San

Marco and Gorizia. In spite of the shells, it is even more unactual than the front lines in Flanders. You feel that you are really in Arcadia, and that somebody is playing a rather childish bad-form joke, which one best snubs with inattention. Even the woods have hardly suffered: at least their general effect is unaltered.

22. THE CARSO

The Carso is like nothing I had conceived of it from the papers. I had figured it a rocky Sahara, lifeless and barren. But in actual fact it is an enormous, undulating highland of mountain limestone, exactly like the limestone pavements under Simonstone, but on a gigantic scale. Also, it is green and scrubby with grass among the cracks and crevices, and powdered with vivid emerald cop-pice of little goat-bitten acacias and such-like. Of course, in high summer it must be as baking as hell. For it is true there is no real water: the resemblance of the whole scene to our own mountain limestones is only heightened by the way in which the surface water has worn it into abortive cup-shaped hollows like very young potholes. They are called *doline*, and the whole surface is carved with them, and every one, of course, serves as a natural dug-out in attack or defence; often they are very elaborately strengthened, and garnished for occupation. And now sometimes on the white pallor of their slabs you still see a skull lying, startlingly yellow and vivid.

The Carso is a haunting place, wonderful and beautiful: and so overpoweringly enormous in its sweeping monotony. There are, or have been, villages and houses here, but you lose sight of them in the immensity of the scene, even if

they are still in existence to be lost sight of. For most of them have been hammered flat, and the desolation, at last, is like that of the Somme. But even where you do see little reefs of ruin far away on some rise in the huge distance, they are the tiniest lonely irrelevancies on that titanic stage. All the life there ever was on the Carso was but a poor thing at best. For nobody but bone-poor Slovaks would ever live or could ever live on these poor hopeless uplands.

So that, whether the Carso is to be Austrian or Italian, it is a problem of the future who will return to settle here, if anybody does. And all the life there now is on the Carso is a mushroom affair, lurking out of sight down in the Vallone. The Vallone is a deep, ample gully cutting into the mass, and must once have been a wild, picturesque place enough. Now it is one great raw drain of naked brown earth, covered with men and tents. It is the main Italian camp, both of living and dead, hiding securely from the Austrian shells; and the strangest, most paradoxical thing to descend upon unexpectedly from the swoops and slants of emptiness up above.

All the highland is yet very unhealthy with Austrian fire, for they still hold a good half of that line of dumpy peaks which hedges the Carso. One behind another they rise, higher and higher, dreary brown and purple eminences sometimes dark with woodland. On this side they slither vastly and gently down in long, slow falls, with here and there the tiny ruin of a town profiled on the distance. The Italians are only in possession of the nearer ones: the second Faite and Stol are the Queen and King of the line, and both of these are still Austrian. Stol is the end and cul-

mination; and both of them perpetually shell the Italian Carso.

All the roads are screened, but even so, had the weather not been so unfavourable for artillery, we should hardly have been able to go as far as we did, or see as much. As it was, we meandered hither and thither over the undulations, leaving the menacing succession of purple pyramids unfolding longer and longer to our left behind us. There are no features now, and no more names to give than on the Somme; the poor Slovak hamlets have simply ceased to be. At the same time, having been built of solid stone, they are not reduced to such mere undiscoverable moundage as the Somme villages; and they are so far in a better state of repair that you could quite definitely notice when you are going through where once there was one. None the less, there is so little of them, and they are anyhow so minute on the scale of the Carso, that you hardly do notice when you are passing through Oppiachasella, or whatever it may have been. You merely wander vaguely up and down in the void sameness of grey limestone and green scrub. I began to think surely we must soon have traversed the whole breadth of the Carso, and be coming within sight of the sea. And hardly had I made myself discover a dim gleam away to the right than we topped a rise, and came immediately into full view of the Adriatic.

23. THE ADRIATIC

Flat and smooth as a mirror lay its green infinity, under a pearly grey sky with silver streaks. And immediately below us, just peering over the steeply folding falling shoulders of the Carso, the chimney stacks of Monfalcone,

with a strip of brown marish flat beyond: and then, stretching away and away to the south beyond, far out into the sea, the enormous *maremma* plain of Aquileia. I could hardly tell it from the sea itself, as it faded at last into the dimness of distance; if it had not been for the infinitesimal pinpricks of the spires here and there, and the faint occasional furry lines of far-away poplars. The sea, too, had a metallic calm gleam that day that seemed more solid and real than the land. I do not know that I have ever seen any view quite so august in that particular way. The tranquil spaciousness of it is overpowering. Away to the left the sea prolongs itself up the Gulf of Trieste, and there is all the long, steep line of the Carso, dropping to the water in an impregnable curtain the whole way; and close on the foreground the dark, sinister mass of Hermada, from which the Austrians command Monfalcone still and all these fells of the Carso.

In spite of dodging behind the road-screens, and only peering through their gaps cautiously, it was not considered well that we should too long tempt Providence by stopping to meditate over that serene grandeur. It was so great, though, that I lost the ominousness of its details. Stol, far away now behind, on the rim of the view, and Hermada, bulking large and gloomy and multitudinous close by, were hill-masses like any others, and the curling puffs of grey smoke that kept on erupting from their flanks or on the nearer fells were odd, detached incidents that one observed with an innocent interest as natural phenomena. But we now retraced our steps, and mounted and dived and mounted and dived over the undulations of the Carso, — to call it a plateau is utterly misleading; anything

less like a plateau you never beheld, — and down into a particularly deep hollow where the grubby little pool of Doberdo drearily hides; and then up a particularly steep rise to the last verge of the highland, from which you drop swiftly down into Monfalcone at the foot of its last low flanks, where they slope to the plain and the sea, with Selz cowering into their shelter.

24. MONFALCONE

Monfalcone is but a melancholy battered ruin by way of a town. The Austrians hammer it perpetually from Hermada. They hammer it particularly as well as generally; the Sindaco is a refugee from Trieste, and he has had to change his house seven times already, so pertinaciously do the Austrians search out his whereabouts with shells. The streets of solid stone houses are badly battered all through, and the place is no health-resort. The dockyards which are its real *raison d'être* lie farther down the *maremma* strip, — a stately congregation of tall shattered skeleton masses, seeming like the bones of stranded dead giants, still standing on this desolate shore. But inside the yards there is something much more impressive still. For the Italian cavalry swept Monfalcone with a rush in their great hour, and the dockyards were overwhelmed in the very moment of turning out two new ironclads, a smaller one and a huge Austrian Lloyd. They did what they could, and burned the entire plant. But they could not remove the ships or destroy them. So there to this day they still are, frozen into the dead dock, naked bulks of iron, gone all of a solid brilliant red-rust colour with fire and weather.

25. THE IRONCLAD

The big one is a most breath-taking sight, looming far overhead, and more enormous than any creation of man you ever dreamed of, — for, of course, one has never looked up at the hull of a big liner from the level of its keel before, — like some orange-coloured whale some fifty times larger than the wildest whale that threatens your canoe in a nightmare, and solidified in immortal death on a lifeless shore. It is a petrification of something so enormous that you do not feel that it ever could have been alive, or ought to. The flights of ladders by which you go up into its bowels are lofty and long; but they look like a compilation of spillikins against the side of a pyramid that is standing on its head: as you yourself go up, you feel smaller and smaller, till one becomes the merest emmet on the wall of Babylon, obliterated in a sense of one's own abject insignificance.

When you do at last get inside you find the same solid fusing by fire. It is all iron; not a scrap of woodwork, of course, was left. In the echoing, dark emptiness you tramp down cavernous gutted corridors, and huge, void spaces. You see where cabins would have been, and saloons, and engine-rooms. It is absolute emptiness now, all of it, stark and adamant, the mere iron bones of the building, with no rag left of sinew or flesh. In the grim damp twilight of it you hear noises as you might in a cave, uncanny, hollow drippings that reverberate in remote depths. And in the dusk everything is of the colour of stale old blood, cold and scaly, dank, and leprous everywhere with rust. Along temporary planking you proceed, above unguessed abysses

of darkness below; and at last you come to the prow, where an observation-post has been established. That view is the most vivid lesson of the war.

26. MORAL GEOGRAPHY

You peer through the horizontal slit, and there in front is the whole Gulf of Trieste, with Trieste at the far end, lounging comfortably on its slopes and hills. And you see at once that Trieste might as well be in the moon for all the chance we have of getting there by frontal approach. It may be only twelve miles away from one's eyes, but it is obviously twelve thousand from one's feet. All that twelve miles of gulf is commanded without one break by the cliffs and undercliffs of the Austrian Carso, the gleaming, craggy steeps of Nabresina with the Austrian mountains piling up again behind. And all the Italians have is just the smallest strip of the immediate foreground, across the bright-green sea-flat in front, to where the fells of Hermada begin to rise sharply, with Duino on its bluff jutting out at their foot into the sea. In front of Trieste I find myself realizing with rage that all this time I have been thinking of the Italians as being really, as well as geographically, within twelve miles of the place, — a motor run of twenty minutes or so! Why, it is only to be hoped they are within twelve years of it. For there is no such thing as physical geography any more: it is all moral geography. A place is not as far off as a crow's flight: it is as far off as it will take one to get there. Trieste is even farther from Monfalcone than Lhasa from London. And in any case, the only possible road to Trieste runs through Laibach.

27. SANTA MARIA

And you will not wonder, by this time, if my seeing powers were running low. Home we proceeded from Monfalcone, straight across the plain, towards the island ridges of Cormons, and thence round the corner up into the Bight of Udine. Many interesting places we passed, if there had been anything left of me to be interested: Pauline Bonaparte's Villa Vicentina, lost in its woods; and the vast decayed fortifications, walls and moats and red-brick out-works, of Palmanova, gone quite asleep in death: with the tree of Liberty still standing in the huge empty piazza, and its streets with neat-paned little shop-frontages exactly as it might have been any English country town. Next came Santa Maria Longa, with miles of rest-camps full of Italian Tommies, simple-looking sturdy folk, loafing in crowds, and washing their things in the roadside ditches as busily as if they had been Chinese. And then, infinitely remote down the left-hand distances of the plain, I perceived a tiny spire faintly pricking the sunset, and, on one of those sudden instincts that one has, I asked what it might be. I was right; it was Aquileia.

28. THE HOSTILE HILLS

All this is the bumble of an overborne brain. What I do bring back with me from my first day out here is something not unlike depression — unless this, too, be mere tiredness. I have a feeling that the hills have betrayed me. I see them all round Italy now, not as guardians, but as enemies. They are the advance posts of her invaders, not her own wall of defence. I cannot understand how Italy could ever conduct any campaign of offence; it seems to me

hard enough to understand how she can even defend herself against that terrible unbroken semicircle of hostile citadels perpetually menacing the wealth of her helpless plains. They must be the most wonderful people surely, and the most wonderful army, to have achieved what they already have, against that awful frontage. And yet, how ironically little it is, and won at what a fearful cost, and on how thin a line how heroically held! I never had the smallest idea before.

29. THE FRAGILE HOLD

Sabotino won, Santo won, but the hundreds behind hundreds of yet other worse heights that are not won! that have all got to be won, each by each: and then held. It is the heartbreaking hydra-like quality of this Italian war against the Alps that even when one has been conquered there yet remain more and more and more behind that, in an almost incalculable army, far away back across Europe. Where is the place where Italy can hold a secure front? And on what terrifyingly frail chances depend the small advance that she *has* made! A yielding at one point, a canker of fear or disloyalty or weariness, and would not the whole chain collapse with the breakage of one link, and all the gains be lost, and the Austrians down into the plain of Venice?

But "do not let us give way to such gloomy thoughts." You certainly never saw a finer and more determined army: and what they have done is only the earnest of yet more to come. I cannot pull my mind away from that Tervaner, though; it is crystallized on my imagination as a nightmare symbol of menace.

Yours

R. F.

XV. THE ISONZO, THE BAINSISSA, AQUILEIA

Comando Supremo, Udine

October 20, 1917

I HAVE indeed now seen something of the Italian army and what it has done. I have let the days accumulate before telling you, though, not only because one needs leisure for the sediment to settle, but also because it is really hard to find time or energy for writing, with all this incessant travelling, which takes up the whole day, and leaves one at the end with no spirit left for writing.

It is still ominous dark weather. But it always manages, as usual, to let me see everything I want to, in the very finest conditions. But I am afraid it minimizes the chance of any Italian push this autumn. A winter campaign up in these Alps must be no picnic; and, of course, one has to remember that thousands of these people hail from the South, and can hardly be expected to thrive in the rigours of the Alpine winter. Also, they would hate it, I suppose, to a point that might damage their efficiency.

I. CONGLOMERATE ITALY

That is a thing that is getting borne in upon me out here, that I think I never realized at home. You cannot make a kingdom by calling it one: and Italy is still really a bundle of different principalities, different interests, different races almost, still in process of growing together into a whole, but with the fusion not by any means complete as yet. Men and newspapers seem to expect that

big things can be accomplished finally by word of mouth, or scrap of paper, between a Saturday and a Monday. But the mills of history grind exceeding slowly, and a hundred years in their sight are as a week-end to a journalist or an impatient spectator. Therefore, with an army made up of men from a dozen countries, so to speak, united in a common interest quite recently and with the gum not set, you have to deal a great deal more carefully than with the solidarity of an entire nation like the British Empire, which really has attained (more or less) to the sinking of local interests in one big general one. But naturally a man of the Basilicata, or of Tuscany (with its comfortable memories of the Hapsburgs), might ask why he should find himself fighting for Venice's quarrel with Austria, or Verona's, up among cold, hateful mountains full of snow and slush. At least that is my theory, from the odds and ends I see and hear, — that Italy is the most composite army among the Allies, and has to be "gentled" as such, in a way not necessary among the rest of us.

2. THE FOOTHILLS

These clouds and rains are beautiful, but forbidding. We went off in a dark morning for the Isonzo — across the plain, and then straight up into the foothills behind Cormons, instead of coasting round it, and on towards Podgora. Those foothills are a wonderful rich territory, with a tossed-about opulence of confused hills, heartbreakingly like the Red Basin of Szechuan, in their wealth of copse and wood. As you go farther, the ridges climb higher and higher, steeper and steeper, with deeper and deeper glens down in between; and richer and lusher

yet with peach and vine and willow and fig and poplar. In and out among the ever-increasing crumples of the landscape we curled and sank and ascended in the luxuriant chaos, amid mud and lorries innumerable, up towards a chilling sky of cloud. On the pinnacles we were into it, choking in the cold, swirling dark, with the earth looming ghostly through the wavering veils of mist. It was the wildest far view downward, all a crazy surf of russet-and-golden tumbles, with infinitesimal villages, and their campaniles only pointing the irreducible disorder of it away and away down the distance, and away and away up ahead. All sense of direction faded.

Our culmination was San Martino, sitting proudly along its high col in a curve. And after that, in the cold of the cloud, we coiled round the high necks of the woodland, glowing with beech and chestnut; until suddenly we turned the final one, and there, straight down below us, very small and grey and far, brawled the Isonzo; and on its other side the blank huge wall of the Santo ridge rose up and up in blackness till it faded into the grey. On our right ran out the sharp-ridged promontory of Sabotino: and there was Gorizia remote and tiny in the distance beyond.

3. DOWN TO THE ISONZO

It was a wild alpine air, icy and dank with autumn. Everything smelt hollowly of frost and decay, as down we began vertiginously plunging through the woods towards the depths of the river. The air seemed to grow darker and darker upon us as we dived, and the mass of Santo more and more blocked out the pale daylight overhead. This

road is a military novelty, like almost all these roads in the hills. It does give an idea of what war involves in these mountains, to find each one of their necks and passes now furnished with a magnificent new motor-road of its own, whereas in time past they would have had to be contented with one indifferent mule-track to the whole range.

4. MILITARY ROADS

And the very hugeness of this new arterial system makes one also feel how frail it is, how easily dislocated; and, with that, how anxious and uncertain lines of defence are bound to be in modern war, among mountains like these, with one main aorta along the crests, dependent on dozens of tributaries from below, each coiling up one rib of the innumerable hill-crumples that shoulder their way at last to the supreme *arête*. It is even difficult to realize how new the whole development is, as one winds down the abrupt, violent hairpin curls, behind dense screens at every open turn, towards the river at one's feet through the trees. For you would think a road so splendid and so daring had always been here, and that it had carried tourist traffic in public *char-à-bancs* for the last twenty years at least.

5. THE TROUGH OF THE ISONZO

Well may it be screened from the huge impending mass of the Bainsizza wall, and Santo, towering opposite. All that was Austrian once, and the topless scarps are now a wilderness of blasted grey rock-chaos, with skeleton trees and black serpents of barbed wire among the rocks and the rare green things that have again begun to push.

When you get down to the trough of the river, and look up at the heights overhead, it seems sheerly incredible that any mortal race of men should have dared attempt the scaling of them under fire, let alone succeed in doing so. You are down in the dark depths of a trench, the mouth of the Isonzo gorges. On both sides you are starkly imprisoned between the mountains; on the one hand the red-and-golden woodlands down through which you have come sliding, and on the other the denuded desolation of the steeps up which the Italians achieved their impossible adventure.

And now the stress of war has moved away from it. The villages along the banks are dead and broken, and, wherever there is foothold along by the river itself, everything is churned into the mud of one continuous camp away up to Canale and Tolmino. It is a dreary scene, like a drain among brambles, deep between close banks so high that they keep out the daylight, and you cannot even guess at their tops. We went no farther up the Isonzo than Canale; away ahead of us loomed the mountains of the Upper Basin, Caporetto and Monte Nero, and the deep hollow of Tolmino; even here the old front lines meander alongside all the way, and all the way you are trying to imagine the assault upon the impending enormousnesses of mountain overhead, which I should not rejoice to walk up anyhow, even if only burdened with a trowel, and against a shower of snowflakes, not shells and bullets. No wonder the Austrians felt themselves secure; they did not believe the incredible — and it came upon them. Well can you understand, here, how even the Italians have to have picked forces for this work — the Inflamed Ones, the

Arditi, who storm the precipices in a baresark frenzy of splendour, and clear the way for the others to come up afterwards and finish the work. No wonder the Arditi do nothing else. You do not blunt the edge of a razor by setting it to minor jobs.

6. THE BAINSIZZA

Above Canale we turned sharp upwards, to ascend to the Bainsizza overhead, by another new motor-road, clear-cut and magnificent as a fresh-minted coin. Up and up and up, into the increasing cold of the alpine autumn, and through the successive zones of alpine woodland, chill and rich with the scent of decay, and with belated cyclamen in flecks of amaranth among the drifted beech-leaves on the crests of the banks, or peering from between the slants of grey worn limestone boulders in the woodland. The higher you get, the more frequent become the steep little alpine clearances of lawn between the thinning flights of the trees, diminishing to scrub; and the more evident grows the rocky structure of the highland. You hardly know when you come on to this. You do it surreptitiously, up a glade that coils into the rim, so that you hardly realize, as you begin rounding the shoulders of the upper fell, that you are indeed on what is called the Bainsizza Plateau.

The name is even more absurd than on the Carso, the Bainsizza highland being so very much higher and so very much wilder. We have not got, in point of fact, any word that gives the right idea; even the best single word there is, the Italian "Altopiano," has to have the "piano" element ruled out before one can begin to understand what

the thing is. Tableland would do, in so far as the elevation on legs is concerned, the raising of the thing to an overhead level. But, unfortunately, there then comes in the idea of level, as with tables, which are essentially flat; whereas flat is the very last thing that these plateaus are. If you like, indeed, to imagine a table set with breakfast things, and plants in pots and so forth, and then with the tablecloth thrown over all these so as to produce a higgledy-piggledy of ups and downs, then you would no longer have such a bad idea of these plateaus. But the best thing to call them is mountain countries piled up above lower mountain countries on whole subsidiary mountain-ranges of their own — a jumble of landscape up in the attics.

As soon as you have emerged upon the upland of the Bainsizza, you find yourself lifted into a wild phantasmagoria of peaks and pinnacles, and hills and holes and heights and depths and dells and glades. It is a marvellous gigantic chaos, leaving the Carso a mere crumpled table-napkin on a cushion. The road dazes you with its deviosities, away and away, round under peaks of scar-limestone, or small golden coppice, and along the rims of deep dingles full of scrub and stone. Some of the depressions are big bland valleys of alpine lawn, and some of the elevations are real high peaks, dark and velvety with forest. You never could guess that another world of ups and downs lay three thousand feet beneath you, a whole storey lower.

The entire scene and all the grassy lawns are osseous with white-limestone outcrops, just like the scar-limestone at home, multiplying the scale by twenty. And so, in a depression which is really a smiling shallow vale, we came

into the battered wreckage of Bate, and here we now really were in the heart of the Bainsizza; and on the right towered its rim-ridge of high pyramids, from Kuk and Velenik to Santo, banking it up from the trough of the Isonzo, and thus roughly parallel to the road we had followed coming up the valley.

7. BATE

Bate is also Bainsizza, but there is little left of it to call by either name. It is the wreck of a village, and the church steeple has the cupola that always means Austria. There are actually thatched houses here, too. But it is all dead and broken to bits and deserted, lying out in its placid green meadows like any village in a gentle dip of the Upper Engadine, with a grassy flight of pyramids along behind, and in front a wilder protection of limestone-mackerelled monticules, under the towering line of Kuk and Velenik overhead, dark in forest under the clouds. As we went on out of Bate, the landscape grew fiercer and fiercer in its wild ups and downs, as fantastic as a Chinese picture, of bony leprosy of limestone among the coppice on the successive pinnacles you skirt. If you have seen soil blasted and broken up with frost, still white all over its crusts and crevasses, you will get an idea of these heights and depths of the Bainsizza, crusted and crevassed everywhere with limestone in just the same effect, enormously magnified, with grass struggling in the interstices, and on the opener slopes the crevasses asprout with scrub. Among the scrub and the coppice and the boulders, up on the pinnacles and down in the dales, everywhere there are grey tents, lurking almost undiscoverably in multitudes un-

counted, like lice in a fleece. It must be cold, dreary living; you can hardly tell the dark specks of the tents, except with practice, among the pallor of the crags and blocks in which they swarm.

8. AT RAVNA

I should like to see the flowers up here in early summer. In the late autumn, of course, it is all dead and dank, hectic in the hateful livery of death. At long last our undulations ceased, and we swept round under a slope into a wide green basin, with a dip and a neck between us and the rise beyond, that shot up dimly into cloud. Here, crouching under the hill at its back, is Ravna, with its *ci-devant* Boche hospital now turned into a motor-mounted ambulance station, with full-fitted operating-rooms and an X-ray room, and every contrivance of modern surgery and aseptic treatment, — a thing that greatly astonished my slow mind to come on in those cold alpine heights. We were shown yet more rooms in process of being fitted up, and the actual infirmary full of patient, quiet wounded, looking so little in their beds: and then we were led into elaborate caverns quarried out into the limestone of the hill at the back, their white roofs all aglitter with diamond water-drops in the brilliant glare of the electric lighting. Each of these chambers, one out of another, is arranged as a hospital room, and they are meant for the security of the wounded whenever the Austrian shells become too copious on the place. For the Austrian fire comes dropping over the ridge behind every night, and their batteries are not more than some two thousand yards away, on the Terno-vaner; the corrugated iron roofs of the hospital huts are peppered and riddled with shrapnel.

9. FROM THE NECK

The Ravna Basin is practically the end of the Bainsizza. Or rather, it here pinches in violently, and nothing of it goes on southward except its spinal rim of peaks, which runs forward into the dark, and culminates high ahead in Vodice and Monte Santo. We came round the curve, and on to the neck of the dip. At once the heavy screening of the road begins again, and continues to the right, up the ascending bend out of the shallow. For you are open to the whole fire of the Ternovaner Wald at this point.

Away to the left the Bainsizza highland sweeps forward again in a widening curve, round the Concha, and is only sundered from the Ternovaner by the deep trench-like gully of the wooded Cepovaner Thal, which cuts down into the saddle between them. And away to the right, under the towering lines of the Santo slopes, the Concha gently sinks downwards to the Sella di Dol in the distance, with the pyramids of San Gabriele and San Daniele banking it up from the back, beyond the fall of Santo. It looks from here like a sort of natural bridge between Italy and Austria, damming up the dip; and on its farther side you can see the white line of the Austrian road, beginning to slant up the long flank of the Ternovaner.

The fighting lines are there, and zigzag this way and that in the deep basin of the Concha, with an apparent untidy irrelevance that makes one have to stop and think hard to realize that possession of every one of those infinitesimal little ruined barns down there and of each gutted handful of houses, means desperate fighting and the lives

of men. For war, up in these mountains, seems so abominably little and puny for the harm it does: and the smallness of its triumphs something terrible when you have grown to understand their cost.

10. THE INNUMERABLE ENEMY

All that even the Italians have been able to do is to establish themselves on just one minute outlying protrusion of hummock at the foot of the Ternovaner; just as all that their conquest of the Carso amounts to is an imperilled tenancy of the merest final snout-tip of that gigantic highland, its extreme point where it drops to the sea. Yet, standing on the Bainsizza, one ought not to say that these gains have been small or incommensurate. It is only that there yet remains such an appalling lot to do, and always will. It is almost enough to make the most triumphant and inflamed of Arditì shed tears, even in the first flush of standing victorious on Monte Santo or the Bainsizza, to look north and east and west, and to see nowhere anything but an interminable ruffled ocean of mountain peaks, all hostile; and nowhere any possible point of repose and secure possession — until you dominate the plain of Vienna.

We now retired from the screen, and began curving round upwards out of the Ravna dip, over the shoulder-saddle of Vodice on the far side of it, this being a nick in the rim-range that runs all along above the Isonzo, bearing up the Bainsizza highland. Vodice is red and raw with shell-fire, a hideous, gloomy picture in the gloom of the clouds. By this time we were almost in them, and the slopes of the mountain wavered up overhead into a cold,

white obscurity. It seemed quite useless to think of attempting the even higher point of Santo behind it: we discussed abandoning the scheme in favour of trying for a more possible view from Sabotino. However, I banked upon my luck as usual, and voted for Santo. Hardly had we turned the shoulder of Vodice and come out on the Isonzo flank of the mountain, than there immediately above us, on the left, was not only the point of Vodice itself, but the high pyramid of Santo soaring up beyond, inky-black-looking in the wet chill of the air, but clear of cloud.

11. UNDER MONTE SANTO

And what a view! For now you are on the side of that tremendous slope which falls away so steep and far to the little ice-grey thread of the Isonzo down below, closely imprisoned in its gorges between the Santo range and Sabotino opposite, which is not a pyramid any more, but a long, very narrow ridge, dropping upon the Isonzo all in a series of white limestone cliffs and forested shelves in successive strata. Sabotino from here, in fact, is a sheer wall, making the donjon of the Isonzo.

And then down in the open country beyond the mouth of the gorges, you have that entire marvellous panorama, framed between Sabotino and Santo, far out over Gorizia and all the plain, and all the long purple lines of the Carso and dark Hermada, and all the top of the Adriatic gleaming silver over the distance. It is enough to make any one try to be picturesque; but not even a painter could render it. And even that was not all: for away to the right, over the head of Sabotino's scarped limestone cliffs, there lay unfolded the entire enormousness of the Venetian-Lombard

Plain, out to Udine and indefinitely out beyond, with the chaos of the foothills rippling down into it. But the cloud-canopy lay so low and heavy that you could hardly realize the solidity of that infinite dim darkness, blank in the vaporous greyness, except for long blurs of orange-tawny sunlight haunting the murk from behind, and remote golden threads of river here and there over the haze of the land, and the golden veil of the sea beyond.

The road here is very densely screened, like all the others on the open flanks of the mountains. From a distance they look like zigzagging bars of tawny on the grey of the limestone; and, of course, their screens are merely meant to conceal the traffic on them, and not by any means the roads themselves, which, on the contrary, they boldly assert. As far as the col between Vodice and Santo the road climbs along the rocky slope; but there we had to alight and walk up to the top itself through crowds of busy Tommies, along a mule-track mostly boulders, and ankle-deep in mud and slush of the traffic.

12. ON MONTE SANTO

The vast pyramid of Santo is like nothing you could imagine. Once it was a wooded peak with limestone outcrops among the coppice; now it is one unbroken gaunt white ruination of shell-shattered limestone, ghastly in its utter nakedness; and a sordid wilderness still, amid the dazing whiteness, of wire and shells and every kind of débris. There is not the smallest trace of life subsisting, except an occasional sprout of green in the crack of a boulder, and the lovely marbled leaves of cyclamen occasionally peering heroically to life again under a rock.

Easily enough you could imagine a battalion of babes in cradles defending a citadel like this; but hardly the high gods themselves attacking it, still less carrying it by storm. A sight like this makes me feel very humble towards man in general, and towards the Italians in particular. The horror of all it stands for comes near to overpowering my own thought, and yet was powerless to conquer human endurance.

Up at a slant we picked our way among the ruins of the rocks, secure behind screens, until we came to the actual knife-edge nose of the ridge, immediately below the peak itself. One must not be indiscreet or prominent here, but if you peer forth cautiously from behind a tuffet of matting or a withered pine-bough, you have your reward. I will not give you the panorama again; it is the same as from the road, though now, of course, even more enormous, since there is nothing more in front of you whatever except, so to speak, all the kingdoms of the earth and the sea, unfolded beneath as if they were on a chart.

13. ITS PANORAMA

But now again you begin to get the reverse side of the picture. Below you, Santo drops to a low ridge, and thence the *arête* runs away for something like half a mile ahead, and then rises in the pyramid of San Gabriele, round about which go coiling the front lines of Italy and Austria. All the fell is of brownish purple, looking like moorland. But it is constant shell-fire that has done that. The whole time the air keeps humming and booming, and mountainous grey puffs come sprouting from the sere, heathered-looking shoulder.

But San Gabriele is much lower than Santo. Perhaps you get the fulness of the prospect best from the observation-posts higher up, just under the mountain-ranges of white ruin on the actual apex that once was the convent which gave the hill its holy name. This itself would hardly be a healthy place to observe from; the tracks and peep-places unobtrusively lurk below among the tumbles of rocks on the slope. Peering out, you look down the *arête* to San Gabriele straight ahead beneath you, with San Daniele, like a little brother, farther to the left, behind the Sella di Dol, which sweeps down in a long bend from the left, to bridge the hollow between this ridge and the mass of the Ternovaner Wald. From here you command the entire dip of Dol much better than from the Ravna neck; with its undulations and diversities, and little villages and coppiced ridges, and its gradual widening sweep upwards behind you to the Concha di Gargaro, with the massive forward sweep of the Bainsizza behind and then the cutting of the Cepovaner Thal. At the saddle-end ahead, — the actual Sella di Dol, — it runs into a shell-browned haze of woodland, and there is woodland on its ribs and pinnacles. Otherwise it is an islanded, inletted sea of green meadows, now churned to mere mud, and pitted all over with shell-holes full of muddy water. You have a perfect bird's-eye view of the whole scene, and the little countless craters make it look like a landscape in the moon, if it were not for the green of the lawns they have splashed in, and the watery gleam with which they wink up, like bleary, dun-coloured sequins scattered on a floor of mud.

You are behind the scenes. The Ternovaner is more foreshortened than ever from here, more and more of an

overwhelming mass; down at its foot, in a bay of the vale, is the ruined town of Fopka, where the Italians actually are; shells were hooning and screaming to and fro the whole time, and, down below, the middle air above the valley was perpetually bursting out into fluffets of dark shrapnel smoke. The Italian batteries were hunting the Austrian road up the Ternovaner, and the Austrians enquiring after various little Italian camps that lurk among the skeleton ruins in the valley.

14. CYCLAMEN EUROPÆUM

The fellow in the observation-post was a great jolly giant, black and buzzle-headed and curly-bearded as a Pathan; he peered through his peep-holes, and was satisfied, "*Attualmente la visibilità è buona*," he announced down the telephone in rich, fruity tones; and there soon followed an increase in the number of smoke-plumes leaping up from the brown slope and shoulder of San Gabriele. However, I myself was now concerned with mightier matters. Those peering cyclamen clamoured to me irresistibly for the trowel; and what Englishman ever before has collected cyclamen on Monte Santo among the shell-fire? So out I whipped my weapon and went to work, regardless of the humming and the drumming of the air with shells. The Americans of the party were amazed, and considered it a typical instance of British phlegm. So it might have been, indeed, if any of those shells had been coming anywhere near me, or if I had not quite well known that they were all passing elsewhere. However, far was it from me to damage that flattering illusion; and even as it was I kept a due regard to caution, not adventuring rashly out of the shelter of the screens.

In my task I grew quite cold and dull to the universal scene of white ruination that the whole seared, blasted height presents. Imagine all the chalk cliffs of England, hardened into limestone, shattered into fragments, and then piled up into a five-thousand-foot pyramid of nakedness. There never could be adequately imagined, though, such a heaping as this of blanched bare scree and raw earth tossed up, with blackened stakes here and there uprooted and lying, and dark tangles of barbed wire; but all the piteous dead of the place had by this time been tidied off the abandoned pandemonium of shingles and shell-splinters. Now it was even quite a scene of life, with the Tommies going to and fro. Often they cheered the Americans with a homely greeting; one of them had been a tight-rope acrobat in a London music-hall and talked London.

15. ZAGORA

So we got back to the car, and, now that we had had our view, the air darkened again to blackness over the peak, and the rain once more vindictively descended. In a serene triumph of spirits we ground and slid away downwards to the Isonzo. We went down by another new road; the hairpin coils keep one's heart on the hop in all this mud, especially as it is there that you most certainly swing round upon ascending lorries unbeknownst. For the hillside is acrawl with traffic, and soon we were down into the May-June scene of desolation — all the shoulders and flanks of the fell still crude, rusty mud. In the raw mess of it I got an idea what the Somme must have been a year ago. It was the dreariest dead sight, with here and there a perched village on some promontory of the hillside,

now nothing but blackened, charred bones of cottages. In one of these, at Zagora, the Austrians and Italians actually kept house for a long time together in a roofless ruin divided only by a partition wall; but each set mutually protected from the other by its own batteries above. It must have been a straining situation, like Ellena and Pollina and their two uncles in "The Critic," nobody able to strike at any one else for fear of being smitten themselves.

Zagora is not so very high above the Isonzo, and soon we were in the trough of the river again, just where it begins to gloom magnificently down into the gorges. Here, as all the way up, the river-flats are a mere shell-pitted mud-level, grown into a great camp: and when you look up and up at the enormous heights overhead, you do not know whether most to admire the simple, quiet endurance of the men who live down in these depths, or their amazing prowess in walking up out of them to the storming of those mountains, without even any protection from barrage.

The bridge at the head of the gorges had been burst by floods, so back we had to come to Plava, thence to regain the ridge of Sabotino by the road we had originally descended. It was now terrific with streams of lorries whirling down and round the greasy corners upon us, with the fine, careless rapture of mad elephants on the rush. Up we ourselves cautiously crawled, catching our breath at the coils, and marvelling at the mercies with which Heaven seems always to reward madness. On our front, though the corners are as unweaned lambs to these, and the hills mere hassocks to a cathedral, there would be a traffic-director controlling every curve with waves of an autocratic hand.

And I dare say there are sometimes accidents there. Here everybody goes gloriously helter-skelter as he pleases, and there never seems to be one.

We took a new direction from the ridge. But the succession of dips and crests and curls was the same in effect, as we gradually sank down and down among the coppiced chestnut-fells; till in the weeping greyness we came into lurking valleys, filled with more mud-camps, and depressing-looking water-logged playgrounds, where Italian Tommies were splashing about after a football, with a languid distrust, as if they would not know what to do with it if they caught it, and did not much care anyhow. And so we got back to Udine in due course, and heard what news there was of the front.

16. DOUBTS

I wonder how much they tell us? They *say* there is to be no movement on either side till the spring, and that then the Italian army will have its muscles taut for a momentous advance. And yet there do seem to be things going on in the hills all the time — more, I mean, than the mere surface action of preparation and settling-in would explain. And the atmosphere does not give me the impression, somehow, of being quite so calm and confident as it wants to be.

There are stories of *German* prisoners having been brought in among the Austrian ones this last week, and rumors of Germans, accordingly, moving down to the Italian front. And I feel that the idea is not generally popular, that those in authority do not feel perfectly certain how some of these Italian troops will endure their

first meeting with the real Boche. And, of course, there is the worm of pacifist rot trying to spread in the Italian Parliament, and probably wriggling about here and there in parts of the army too. I suppose that even in Italy there are Uncle Simons and Aunt Bethias.

17. GOD AND MAMMON

And also there is the Vatican in the background, more than indifferent, positively hostile to the Kingdom of Italy and Italy of the Italians; more than impartial, positively friendly to the Austrian Empire, on whom it so largely depends for loaves and fishes. Evidently it was with a prophetic eye on the Popes that Jesus said: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." The effort to do so, ever since Constantine, has betrayed Christianity into an ever-deepening morass, out of which no Pope will ever be able to pull it until he is strong enough to give up all the loaves and fishes, and go and sit among the potsherds like Job, discovering again the independence of truth. There is always a fatal and vital antinomy between temporal power and spiritual force. These meditations in me have been stimulated by the sight of a dead church. Fate has given me a thing I never expected. I have been to Aquileia.

18. AQUILEIA

It was an empty day, and I was offered the chance—one in a thousand, sheer joy-ride though it was. It is a long, long way off, is Aquileia, out in the middle of nowhere, on the very last verge of beyond, embalmed in the uttermost silence of the past. There can hardly be anything so completely defunct in Europe — not to be still making a

pretence at being alive. Ravenna itself is a "flowering guardian" and a lively social centre by comparison. Of all Aquileia nothing now is left but the huge basilica looming up from among a dozen sad little houses or so. And that great dead place, above such a dead huddle of hovels, is one of the most emotional things I have ever seen. It is so awfully lonely and bygone, and yet so awfully magnificent in an august extinctness that towers far away above tragedy. You cannot linger to think of its bygone gate, and Attila sitting on Podgora or Cormons to watch it burn; you can only suffer the gigantic presence of the basilica.

Of course, its sheer size and gaunt splendour count for something. It is like the house of a God who has gone out of residence and left it wrapped up in brown holland for a thousand years. From the portal you look uninterruptedly up the whole expanse of the nave, and at the top end a broad, high flight of steps mounts up and up to the chancel, and then another one behind it mounts higher yet to the altar and the yet higher-seated throne of the patriarch behind, under the arc of the apse. And these successive heights at the end of the picture are intensified all down the foreground by the removal of the old Austrian cement pavement that once covered the floor of the nave to the thickness of several feet, and dwarfed the proportions of the building and made the columns look squat and heavy, lumbering straight out of the ground like mushrooms.

Now all that is gone, and the columns rise on their proper pedestals to their full height, and the general scale and perspective have gone right again, and the chancel end of the church rises, as it was meant to, in a broad Jacob's ladder up to heaven. And the original floor that has come

to light adds another touch of interest. It is a primitive mosaic, and the groundwork underneath has given, and now it sags up and down in slow bulges and heaves like a sheet of linoleum flung over some bumpy surface. In itself the mosaic is not very beautiful, but its interest lies in the fact that it provides a definite link between Roman and Byzantine work. It is still predominantly Roman, of course, and far behind the Baptistery of the Orthodox, even, — to say nothing about the Chapel of Honorius and Placidia, and still less about the processions of Justinian and Theodora. But still, through the hard, dull Roman stiffness of it, you do clearly see the new Byzantine art beginning to develop towards its possibilities.

But Aquileia hurts and haunts too much for one's head to be concerned with art criticism while one is there: the vast old echoing emptiness of it is so crushing; you hear your footfalls murmuring among the dead centuries. Everything is dim and dusty-feeling and blurred, — rare monuments of the dead, obliterated paladins and great ladies, rude Gothic carvings on screen and patriarchal throne, the fading colours of Count Popo's restored fresco above it in the apse, — all gone into a far-away land of loneliness and neglect and vacancy. Even the later addition of transepts to the apse only intensifies the dreariness, and so does the one modern touch, a dreadful lachrymose bust of Jesus in red-blotting-paper-coloured marble, in the most gushingly emotional style of to-day's Italian art.

19. THE WAILING AGES

But while I was in the church a thing happened that one might not have the luck of in a thousand lives — a

thing that struck the note of the place as nothing else could have done. For they were cleaning the organ, or doing something painful to it. Anyhow, it was wailing. And it wailed out into the void of the church on one thin high note, unwavering and pale, that literally and physically put its finger straight on one's nerve of tears, and kept it there. It never changed or faltered, it went on all the time, right through me. It was the very voice of the dead church itself, keening for the dead ages. It was like a tap being turned on inside me that I could not turn off again. It hurt wonderfully. Broken up into a blurred sop of emotions, I stumbled among the tombs, and could not escape from the poignant penetratingness of it anywhere. It was not so much that it went through me like the flash of a sword which comes and goes; it was more like the steady pressure of an electric bell in my brain, thrilling unrelentingly upon one unvarying note of torment. I knew now why the repetition of one persistent sound in music makes animals lift their muzzles and howl.

20. THE VALE OF REST

There is a cemetery behind the basilica, very peaceful and vale-of-restish, with tall cypresses glooming blackly, and a large marble poem of D'Annunzio's fixed up on the back wall of the apse. And far away behind, across the monotony of the plain, there are the blue-and-green tumbles of the Carso between the cypress-trunks. I do not know what particular soldiers are buried in this walled garden; but they have a finer type of grave-cross than any I have seen elsewhere — a slender design of iron, carrying a cast-iron garland, half of oak for endurance, and half of laurel

for glory. It is a simple, dignified thing, well carried out; modern without either flourishing claptrap or Boche baldness. Otherwise there is nothing left of Aquileia. Even the patriarch has been disestablished and torn in two; one half of him is Archbishop of Udine, and the other half is Archbishop of Gorizia. And this is the City of the Eagles, which once held its head up in the company of Rome and Constantinople and Milan and Ravenna!

21. THE MUSEUM

Of all that aspiring splendour only a rather huggemugger museum remains, dreary with the dusty dreariness of its kind. Round the arcade in the garden there is a Euston-Road stone-cutter's agglomeration of odds and ends and urns and tombstones and lions and vases — a whole shop-yard of mechanical, third-rate hack-work for popular consumption; indoors there are roomfuls of the better specimens, but it is nothing wonderful. And upstairs there are galleries of glass fragments and scent-bottles and tear-bottles and aligned, dry-as-dusted myriads of household and toilet implements — all the inexorable series of repetitions under cases that make museums so utterly depressing and lifeless. The glass fragments are almost innumerable, and a specialty; shards of vases made out of sections of seaside "rock" candy with the streaks of the pattern cut across. They make it quite as ugly in Venice to-day. But there is also beautiful stuff; glorious great stoppered ginger-jars of aquamarine blue glass, still crammed with what looks like torn-up paper and cardboard, but is really the débris of burned human bodies.

The Italians have generously left untouched the pom-

pous laudatory inscriptions to the Hapsburg Emperors — though the Austrians took pains to burgle all the best and most portable things in the museum before they bolted; so that, among the sands-of-the-sea multitudinousness of the coins in their rows, the eye gets a restful blank wherever there had been some gold-piece, or medal of especial merit.

22. THE ARMY

The alarm of an air-raid frightened the campanile of Aquileia; so we returned again across the plain, through Santa Maria and Palmanova. I was better able, this time, to appreciate the hugeness of the rest-camps of Santa Maria. They run along almost for miles; there must be almost an army there in residence. Very occasionally you do see small, stupid-looking people; but as a whole the army is a wonderful, reassuring sight of health and robustness and fine frames and vivid grey eyes. It must be a curious mixture, the Italian army. Did I tell you that for a long time past they have drafted Southerners to the North and Northerners to the South, so as to get all their men accustomed to all the sorts of fighting that can ever be necessary in Italy; and also, of course, to get all the provinces to know each other, and so knead the kingdom bit by bit into a real unity?

23. THE HOME TOUCH

I love to see them, and to rejoice in their strength and universal look of up-to-the-markness. But does it strike you that all this is rather patronizing and external? that I am seeing these fellows merely with my eyes as a

spectacle, without my brain being hurt or occupied by them? Up north I was in a perpetual stew, bubbling and boiling, like Werther's passions, all the time, and discovering the Unutterable Marvellousness of Man whenever I saw a Tommy straddling by a ditch. Yet here it never comes to me to be anything but cool and calm as a cucumber — a bland, well-disposed, absorbent cucumber, yes, but not in the least degree corrugated or contorted with emotions. I have been wondering all this while why it was that I was thus standing outside. And at a turning of the homeward way from Palmanova, I found out. For suddenly I came on a brace of khaki-clad figures, and two faces of a red that fairly blazed upon the Italian landscape! It was a pair of our own Tommies pushing an ass-cart. And suddenly the world was entirely changed; I was in the realities again, not a spectator outside them any more. I had never suspected the fearful intensity of the pull that one's own people have upon one. But I have certainly learnt it now.

Other people are nothing by comparison; they cannot be anything. One may admire them, and revere them, and have every kind of high and holy feelings for them; but they are not inside one's very bowels, flesh of one's own flesh, and fibres of one's own heart from innumerable ages past. The fact of fellow-countryhood, and all it means, flashes upon you a great deal more vividly here than when those same fellow countrymen are fighting with you for a bus, or crowding you up ten deep in a train.

The Uncles, whose pro-Bochery largely springs from a determination to regard the whole world as brothers (but the sort of brothers you send out to New Zealand and do

not bother about any more), hold race-feeling to be a very unphilosophic, atavistic insulation of one's affections. They care so little, in fact, for anybody that it is easy for them to think they care equally for all. Whereas any real Brotherhood of Man, to *be* real, must mean a keying-up of our emotions all round to an equal pitch of warmth for every one, not a keying of them down to one general monotony of tepid indifference. In any case, whatever later stages of development we may all ultimately attain in this line, for the present our own race-feeling is quite as much as our hearts can hold. The Uncles may have a wide kingdom in the hereafter; Heaven meanwhile be praised that you and I are citizens of England still! — which is no mean city.

Yours

R. F.

XVI. THE TRENTINO

Albergo Milano, Verona

October 22, 1917

1. ACROSS THE PLAIN

THIS letter can only be successive chapters of a diary, recorded as time allows. You will gather from the address that I am being shown the Trentino front. I did think my weather luck had at last betrayed me, when we set off in the dark of the morning from Udine, through bucketing deluges of rain that showed no signs of lifting. It was all blank greyness, with hardly a touch of alleviation. If ever one appeared, it dimly waxed and then darkly waned again, as we miserably traversed the shrouded monotony of the plain. We went through many famous places, but there was no seeing anything but slants of wet.

We crossed the Piave and we crossed the Brenta, and dim hills began once more to loom into sight on the right, flattened blurs in the rain, with more definite grey islands of wooded heights coming nearer, Asolo and the other foothills. We passed through Castelfranco and we passed through Cittadella, and it was like being back in the Middle Ages. I longed to explore those little walled cities that bristled round with towers as it might have been Troy. And so, through avenues of densely wooded villas, we drew into Vicenza.

2. MONTE SUMMANO

In deluges yet denser and more desperate than had pursued us all across the plain we now turned northward

to Thiene and Schio and Monte Summano. And when we came a little nearer, the mountain actually began to appear, in a faint ghostliness. And when we were nearer still, to my complete amazement, out of the uniform haze of rain that veiled the world, only Monte Summano now stood out quite clear, looming almost black into the grey-ness. It is a great high pyramid, the last spur standing out over the plain, protecting the Astico Valley, — a jutting promontory of mountain from that main tumble of lesser Alps that runs south from the Dolomites in a hedge on either side of the Adige, and fades abruptly down upon Verona. These peaks and necks were always a very touchy spot between the Italians and Austrians even before the war. I remember being on Summano once before, years ago, when June sheets all the slopes with azure-blue lithospermum; and even then there were "incidents" taking place between the outposts of the two *soi-disant* allies on the various higher points around.

3. COLLETTI

Summano looked very different now, dark and steely, with raw scars of military roads zigzagging up its flanks. We did not attempt the peak itself, but turned into the bay of the foothills at Santorso, and began ascending towards the *arête*, up one of the many new military roads that feed it (and many of them made by women). The ridge that ties Summano to the main chain is dark and high, and big spars of limestone prick up all along it, looking from below like a *chevaux-de-frise* of almonds and tooth-picks along the crest of a pudding; but when you are up there each one of them is a menacing huge bulk. And you

would never know they were limestone on a day like ours; in the wet they go sleekly black like any granite, as if they had all put on their mackintoshes. You can call the neck collectively Colletti; up there you are well into the alpine cold, with the bulk of Summano towering on the right, and the main mass of mountains in a jumble overhead away to the left.

And now this solitude is a crowded line of defence, with soldiers quartered and the big guns camouflaged all along under flat roofs of sod or a close, interwoven fluffetage of pine boughs, that gives them the feeling of living in delicious sylvan arbours. And when you stand on the actual neck, and look down and across to the ranges on the far side, you realize almost with a shiver, the importance of Summano and Colletti. Far down below at your feet is the Y-shaped valley of the Astico, which curls out into the plain round the feet of Summano. To your left, and all about the valley-head and up beyond, sweeps a huge, bulky tumble of mountains, from Novegno overhead, browned with autumn and black with damp, and the high precipice of Priaforà (with the pierced little natural window that gives it its name shining white like a snow-pat against the grey dark of the sky); and Monte Majo behind it still, newly white, and then many more snow-clad masses grim under the cloud, to the vast, undistinguished hulks of Campomolong and the rest, ahead into the northward chaos; while straight opposite you, over the valley, Cengio and the continuing bastions of the Asiago plateau loom in long ugly lines of flat strata. In the near arm of the Y at your feet is Arsiero, in the far one Astico; the angle is filled by a little shrill peak, or set of peaks, running out from the *massif*

of Campomolong behind. And that is Cimone, where the Austrians still are.

4. THE PERILOUS LINE

In fact, as I say, this view is really a terrifying one. This is the one bit of country where the Austrians have burst through upon the Italian frontier in a wide bulge, to compensate for the northward nibble that the Italians have made in the Ampezzo Valley and Cortina. But the fact of their being here is nothing so very bad; it is the thought of how very little there now is left to prevent their going farther. For everything you see in front of you is Austrian now; the Summano line, away through Priaforà to Pasubio invisible behind it, is the very last defence of Italy. If that one precarious thread of necks and peaks could be badly broken at any one point, there would be nothing left whatever to save Verona and Vicenza and the plain. I cannot see what there would be left to save Milan and Rome.

From the neck of Colletti you turn to look southward down into Italy. Those silly little ruffles of foothills that you see ranging down into the distance and jutting out into the plain, they are not going to be any wall of defence if once the Summano line gives way. However, these again are the idle considerations of a layman who can see only the obviousness of geography. Cadorna is supposed to have the Austrians securely pinned between Pasubio in the south and Colbricon in the north, and we may leave it at that. All the same, such a view gives me a feeling of insecurity, in a quite new way. It brings home to one the unpleasant possibilities of facts, on a gigantic scale.

The Italians, at least, are down in the valley, and their lines even run up across the foremost lower peak of Cimone, on their way down again upon Astico, and thence up the wall of Cengio. The villages in the depths are skeletons, of course, and you can see how Cimone, both fore and aft, is racked and ravaged and brown with fire. The whole ridge of Colletti is awink with guns — not the giants that squat in their houses under the lee of it, and bark over the crest, but others that peer out each through its own window in the succession of caverns with which the whole neck has been pierced all along. And this centre line is almost a camp, with everybody settling in for the winter.

5. THE XOMO PASS

After this another new road carried us round and round, along the vast flanks and shoulders of the Alps, gradually piling up higher and higher above us as we went, in towers and castles. There were various rest-camps in the folds of the fell; and very far away below, upward among the golden crumples of the woodland, the Val dei Signori gradually toiled between the hills, to meet us at the Pass of Fugazze. But there was a long journey yet, under the successive masses. First we passed below the isolated towers of Cogolo, which is part of the Novegno-Summano projection. Before you get to the actual Pasubio mass you sweep round to a col, which is the Xomo Pass. Here we alighted for a while, in the grey steely cold of the clear air, that makes all the browns of the Alps so sere, and turns all their greyness to black. You could not have more grim conditions to see such a scene. We adventured a little down

the raw red road, and through the heavy matting of the screen peered through at Monte Majo just across the depths of the valley, with Posina away below us, and the Cimone towering up over it in profile, so that you could now see how the lines ran, upper and lower, Austrian and Italian, and how the crests had been torn and burnt and blasted. Monte Majo did us no mischief; we were able to stay and get hold of this new aspect of things. Away round to the right Priaforà and Novegno now bulked enormous overhead, with Summano standing out beyond at the end of the spur, even as the ridge of Sabotino runs out to its culmination over Gorizia. But Summano, of course, is a splendid pyramid of mountain all to itself, not merely the conclusion of an *arête*.

6. FUGAZZE

So now we returned over the col, and began curving in and out along the huge flanks, sinking by very gradual degrees towards the Pass of Fugazze, which here begins to come into sight, a neat notch between Pasubio and Baffelan with its poor little gimcrack hotel still perky on the eminence where it perched so proudly in the gay days when the motor-service crossed from Schio to Rovereto. And now you really do come under the shadow of Dolomite. For overhead rise, every moment higher and higher, the terrifying, gorgeous walls and towers and crags of the Forni Altri, rugged and wild and scarred with new snow, their pinky-greyness changed to a dank, shimmering black-and-whiteness under the looming dark of the sky. And even the Forni Altri are but the bastions and outworks of the Pasubio Massif, which overhangs the pass in huge preci-

pices. So round and round we curved, along a vast level descent, under the accumulating enormousness of those Dolomite castellations, intensely gaunt in the gloom, lonely, dark, austere, and grand. And at last we did rejoin the old motor-road up the Valle dei Signori from Schio, and had a few sharp upward coils to the Pian de' Fugazze.

It was all black and white here; we were well up into the snow-zone. And the little hotel, in spite of its glass gone and its tower shattered, looked very saucy upon the scene, pricking up from its hummock against the blackness of the pines, and the desolate walls of precipice behind. The snow-line is evidently much earlier and lower in its descent here than on the Summano spurs. The actual pass is quite a narrow dip between the masses of Pasubio on the right and Baffelan on the left. It was deep in whiteness, and there have to be avalanche shelters all along the hollow. As well there may, seeing that in these regions the violated mountains revenge themselves by killing many more men than either the Austrians or the Italians. Up here you have to learn by fatal experience that a rash cough or the firing of a gun may bring down half a mountainful of snow on your head, if the moment or the place or the time of day or the conditions of the atmosphere are indiscreetly selected.

7. THE VAL DEI SIGNORI

Over the other side of the col there was not much to see. Down and down before sinks the Vallarsa, and across its depths, opposite, a very high spur runs out like a buttress from Baffelan, barring the view, and culminating in the pyramid of Coni Zugna. Round this barrier the Val-

larsa has to sink in a deep curve; and in its roots on the other side, in the Adige Valley, Rovereto lies under the Shadow of Coni Zugna's rose-pink snout, far up in the sky. But the snout was not rose-pink the day we saw Coni Zugna from the Col de' Fugazze; or rather it was so far up in the sky that we could not see it at all. Even the Passo Buole on the neck that leads up to it only wavered faintly now and then into visibility under the cloud. It was a vast obscurity of snow and dimness and darkness. So, in despair of more, we returned to the crest, along under the skeleton ravine-shelters, where snow-sweepers were at work in the white slush; and down into the luxuriant wooded depths of the Val dei Signori towards Schio, by the old motor-road of happier days. A rich, delicious drive it used to be, up among those glades of chestnut: now, not only was it a wet, dreary dusk of autumn, but the peace of it had changed to an unbroken storm of ascending military traffic, turning the whole road to a channel of mud, with new short-circuits built on to relieve the congestion.

8. INTO VERONA

So down we coiled and wound, and into the busy streets of Schio, and along an inlet of the plain till we came to a little pass over the neck of the wooded foothills that brought us over into the Val d'Anio, for a short cut to Verona. Behind us, at the top of the plain, Summano continued to stand out quite plain in all its pyramidal mass, with Colletti running away leftward towards the peaks themselves, — of which we still had occasional glimpses, very awful in blurs of enormous crags through the rain. For, having let us go so long, and allowed us to see all we wanted,

the rain now resumed, and we achieved the remaining quiet miles to Verona under deluges again. The whole sky was once more one sheet of leaden gloom, solid and final; until we turned the last corner, and there, in a perfect picture, the cypresses and towers of Verona appeared, dense like ink, against a band of pure fiery orange all down the west, dazzling under the lid of the blackness overhead.

9. UP THE ADIGE

The next day was glorious. The colours would have made the New Jerusalem look dowdy. The lower hills in the distance were like sapphires seen through water, and, as we turned the slopes, gradually Baldo hove into sight over the foothills, all pure white from end to end, blankly dazzling against the hard blue of the sky. We curved round at last and up into the deep trench of the Adige Valley, and through the gorge of the Gates of Verona, with Rivoli and the other forts sitting on their heights like muffin-dishes with the lids on. After this we were in the trough of the valley, in the cold blue shadow of the cliffs all along overhead on the right, while on the other side the whole wall of them was rose-red in the sun. And the floor of the valley itself was golden yellow with fading vines. In the gaps of the tremendous rosy precipices there came occasional glimpses of the impregnable whitenesses of Baldo, and then more precipices and more in front of us, in an endless perspective, on either hand.

10. UP PASSO BUOLE

We came at last to where Headquarters lived, and found a large towered villa ensconced in a beautifully wild

park of chestnut coppice and bamboo lawns and neglected knots of cedar standing in the grass; and around it thin natural woodland running up to the foot of the cliffs. Here we learned the plans made for us, and ere long set out again to pursue them. We did not go much farther up the valley. Overhead, looking inaccessibly high, jutted the snout of Coni Zugna, and behind it the Passo Buole ridge which connects it with the main mountain masses of Baffelan, above the Fugazze Pass. By this time we were close upon Boche-land, which runs actually at the feet of the Coni Zugna. The trees were already ragged, in profile, on a protuberance just ahead of us under the mountain, when we turned sharply aside out of the Adige Valley into the deep rocky gorge of San Valentino, screened by heavy valances of matting from Boche batteries on the shoulder above Mori across the river. And now the Passo Buole was immediately above us, so high that it dwarfed my previous conceptions of war into nothing. I think I remember being impressed with the sinisteress of little hills like Notre Dame de Lorette on the Flanders front: but then came the Carso, and turned those to mole-heaps: and then the Bainsizza, and brought them down to no more than warts. And finally, the Trentino takes all the mountains I have seen yet, Carso and Bainsizza and Monte Santo and everything, and wipes them out into flatness without an effort.

II. THE ROADS

Heights like this are not believable details in any campaign of men. You look up at the Passo Buole and are stunned: — one topless wall of russet-golden alpine forest and coppice, running up into the whiteness of early snow,

and threaded with the zigzagging scars of new military motor-roads. The road system on the Isonzo front is impressive enough; on the Trentino front it takes my breath away. I begin to realize what it is to make (and keep) adequate communications in a tumbled sea of mountains so enormous. And there cannot be any slight work either, no jerry-building. To do their turn and carry their guns, all these roads have to be made as hard and fast and firm as if they were to serve the traffic of the ages instead of the needs of a year or two. It is almost tragic to think of the multiplicity of these new creations, achieved at such a cost of money and labour, weaving the whole complexity of these useless, immeasurable Alps in their mesh; — and all, in a few years' time, inevitably bound to fall into decay again and fade out into the flank of the fell. For they cannot have any use except for the war; and, even if here and there some specially famous height develops a hotel in time to come, even this will not need some seven broad highways to serve it.

12. THE CREST

The road climbs with astonishing abruptness, hairpin straight over hairpin, up the flayed flank of the mountain, each coil so tight and narrow that often the car cannot swing clean round it, but has to back down again, out over infinity. Higher up you come into the dense goldening coppice of beech; and higher yet to scrub of pines and open lawns, with everything a slush of raw mud and snow. On the actual neck, perched here and there among the scarps and new snowfields, are the huts of settlement, nestling darkly. The *arête* itself is a succession of violent peaks, running out to the culminating burst of Coni Zugna; in

the other direction it loses itself in the mainland of the mountains above the Fugazze Pass. All along their slopes, and in and out among their folds, you see the slants and levels and ample zigzags of the new roads, scars like pale threads stretched over the darkness of the woodland.

13. THE ANTHILL OF CONI ZUGNA

It was all black and white and dazzling. We were in the fresh snowfall here, and through the churned mess of it had now to plod afoot up the road that feeds the ridge. Round and about among its vivid peaks we toiled, in the bitter, glaring gloriousness of the cold; far overhead still towered the pyramid of the peak itself. Finally we reached it, and climbed it, by zigzags of heart-trying, strenuous abruptness; and there immediately plunged into the bowels of the earth. It was like magic. Here had been this cityful of life, coming and going with the activity of an excited anthill all along the ridge to feed the summit; and when you got there, nothing above ground any more, only the unviolated rocks and snow, but down we went into a new secret dark life, as if it might, indeed, have been the bowels of an anthill.

The whole mountain-top, in fact, is hewn out and carved into a set of catacombs more wonderful and labyrinthine and elaborate than one could have thought possible in the time. You grow bewildered out of all knowledge with the multiplicity of galleries: here and there are shafts, with ladders up which the men climb out of the cellarage into the front-line trench, like cohorts of demons in a pantomime; and through the husk of the mountain's rind there are holes pierced, through which the guns look out.

14. THE LIE OF THE LAND

If you look out too, you see before you only the enormous impassiveness of the Alps, vastly white, and walled blankly in rosy grey; you hear and feel nothing except the impassive, enormous silence and emptiness of the enwintered mountains. Yet all the time everything over there is as attentive as everything here is too; and those bare, blind walls of precipices have their rows of pin-point eyes, just like these; and that white vacancy really covers just such another humming hive of underground activity as the white vacancy of Coni Zugna.

It is a stupefying scene, anyhow; but with its hidden suggestion it becomes almost a nightmare. So big, so bland, so void and still and silent; and such a titanic lie the whole time. The everlasting hills themselves turned into camouflage, rigged up into a colossal deceptiveness of calm.

At one of the innumerable points where the *gallerie* send issues up into the trenches, we ourselves went up, when sufficiently dazed with the indecipherable labyrinths of the cavern. And when you get out on to the summit the whole of the war immediately ceases to be. You can no more realize its existence here than you could realize a straw in Niagara. From the summit of Coni Zugna you look out over the infinite depths of the Vallarsa, straight across at the whole mass of Pasubio, Roite, and Austrian Corne Santo. Zugna falls sheer and sudden, in a succession of stark limestone precipices; and in between is that whole tumbled world of depths, with its ruined villages down under your feet like hundreds and thousands scattered on a cake, they are so small.

15. THE WAR VANISHES

It is all big beyond belief; it becomes impossible to think of war in such a connection. And yet there, across the virgin whiteness of the uninteresting Roite-Santo flank, runs a minute black thread, like a bit of black cotton left trailing round a fall of the tablecloth; and it is the Austrian front line — the only suggestion of war in the whole scene, and that so absurd and infinitesimal that it is really more of a denial than a suggestion. You may be told all the details of military movements and developments up here; but the impression utterly eludes you; the mechanism of war, personal or impersonal, is not a thing that one's mind has any room for among circumstances so vast and inhuman as these, that crush the human understanding with their own weight alone. For in all that gigantic vacancy there was nowhere the smallest sign of life or human activity; until, up in the zenith, there came the red midge of a Boche plane, scouting, pursued at once by an efflorescence of Archie-fluffs in the blue, with thuds and crashes of falling butts and fragments, on the rocks and frozen pine-scrub where we stood.

16. THE VIEW

That is the view of the immediate plan of campaign in the main mountain *massif* on one side of the Adige. But the view up the Adige Valley itself and over the ranges on the far side is something even more notable. Down below is the river in the golden green of its vine-flats, looking itself like a winding thread of golden wire, with the pale golden sheet of Garda appearing round the lowest shoulder

of Baldo in a hazy hint, remote in the southern distance. Of Baldo you have the whole profile, from end to end, up and down like a switchback of enormous solid whiteness; and over the dip of the Altissimo, and far away, what I suppose can only be the summit of the Tombea. Then the wide little shallow valley of Loppio starts away at right angles from that of the Adige, between Baldo and the next mass. You see it planned out perfectly: there is the steely glint of the little lake, and Monte Brione, like a slice of melon, just appearing over the neck behind, and the beginnings of Riva beyond, under the tumbled, craggy masses of the Rocchetta.

And then, away from that, up northward, perfectly flat in the hard, clear dazzle of the air, the parallel ranges of the Adamello and the Brenta, in a crested tumble of ice and snow, as you could never see them in the summer, rioting massively northward in such a chaos of glory that the eye cannot separate the clangorous castles of the Brenta from the glaciated enormousness of the Adamello away behind them. After these, the whole world is a mob of mountains, indefinitely filling all the distance, to where it is closed at last along the north by the mass of the Ortler and the Alps of the Val Venosta, hugely barring in the skyline above the farthest creamy-coloured vagueness of the lower snows. And every one in all that incalculable army of mountains is an enemy, an Austrian: in impregnable, irreconcilable ranks as far as sight can reach: except the Adamello and the Marmolata the two greatest of all till you reach the Ortler.

The Marmolata, of course, you cannot see from here, nor any, indeed, of the real Dolomites. They lie away up

north, in the same line as one's self, hidden from view behind the Pasubio-Corne Santo range. You are looking, from the point of Zugna, quite straight up the whole of the Adige Valley, till it loses itself at last in the dimnesses towards the Val Venosta. The river comes down like a thin twist of gold among its mapped-out vineyards, between the wide, rosy walls of cliff that hedge it in and hedge it in as far as you can see. Botzen is just invisible, because of the ripple of small fells that fills the widening river valley above Trento: but there, in the topmost distance at the end of the wall, are the pink precipices of the Mendel quite clear to see.

17. THE OPPRESSION OF THE ALPS

I look at it all now with a heavy feeling of being shut out of paradise. It is even more than that; it is a paradise that has become positively hostile. It is certainly an overwhelming view, wearying in its splendour; and the only war it suggests is a war of the worlds, and a massed army of mountains in array against so poor a mite as man. The Carso and the Isonzo gave me the beginnings of that feeling, and were oppressive and ominous accordingly; but those heights are mere toadstools to these, and here the oppression becomes so enormous upon me that it overgrows itself and passes beyond oppression into sheer annihilation.

In a way the prospect is so hugely hopeless that it even releases you from the burden of hope or fear, and you quietly fade out into the ocean of its mere incalculable loveliness, with something like the tired relief, I suppose, of a drowning man who gives up the struggle for his life,

and lets himself go at last to the infinite embrace of the sea. There was only the indestructible glory of the world unfolded all before me like a scroll. It was a thing too big. I was flooded helplessly by the radiance of it. But for the lack of the ocean's innumerable laughter, it was the first lines of "Prometheus" translated into a picture. I had never before had any real idea, or anything like an idea, of the superhuman size of those four lines. But they filled the whole of this view; and they contained it.

18. THE FRONT LINES

Coni Zugna is the last outpost of Italy at this point. If you peer out over the white snow-cornice of the trench, you look first of all down over rows upon rows of wire into the muddy, shell-pocked saucer of the alp, wide and undulating, with a fringe of sparse pine coppice, and a *casa* still standing quite intact in the middle. This hollow shoulder is the Malga Zugna; and away below there is a trenched, scarred hummock-spur, brown with digging and darkened with shell-fire. And that is the Boches' southernmost hold here, Zugna Torta, clinging desperately round the face of the mountain-peak above. Far below that again is Rovereto in the valley; and then Trento, and Boche-land unbroken. You can clearly see their lines meandering about in the depression of the Mori dip, too, and clambering away up over the hump of Biaena towards the northward masses. The Mori dip, in fact, is a sort of dead No Man's Land now, between Baldo, which is all Italian, and the corresponding height across from Mori above Loppio, which is the defence-line of the Austrians. And from Mori, they immediately cross the valley, and are here on the toe of

Zugna, at a bend halfway between Rovereto and Ala, each of which is in the enjoyment of its enemy's fire — not that the inhabitants of Ala, at least, seem at all discomposed by the fact.

But the minute malignities of man are too insignificant here for me to understand; the glory of the world monopolized me to the end of the day.

19. THE GLORY OF THE WORLD

Even when we returned homeward down the Adige Valley, it was under an almost unbelievably beautiful sunset of flocculent rose-pink cloud-layers, mackerelled out over a sky of shrilling virulent pale green that seemed to glow above the dark-blue limestone cliff masses that imprisoned us on both sides. And then, as we turned the last corner, and began curving round upon Verona, the heaven we left behind was all one fire of vermilion-orange clearness, while the heaven to which we were making was one solid blackness of cloud, very ominous for the morrow. But after such a day as this, what do morrows matter? And so ends its tale: I shall be back at Udine before there will be opportunity to tell you about Verona itself and Asiago.

Yours

R. F.

XVII. VERONA, ASIAGO, VENICE, AND THE END

Comando Supremo, Udine

October 24, 1917

I. VERONA

We have returned from the Trentino trip. The omens of the evening meant nothing, and the third day turned out quite as good as the second. I got out early, so as to study Verona under war conditions before we started. But of the life of a place under such conditions one can really see extraordinarily little. Of course, one can *make* one's self see all the right things; but that is a bad business. All that one really does see, if one is honest, is life going on very much as usual, though perhaps more quietly and less crowded. Naturally the monuments are muffled, and the Scaliger tombs have become towering hen-houses of cement, and even the capitals of their railing have been plastered over till they look like heavily cowed and shrouded little miniature monks perched along on the pilasters.

But otherwise I do not feel you find war so much in obvious evidence here as you do in London — or even Paris: I am sure you do not so incessantly see soldiers and wounded. But one needs the journalist eye if one is to be kept perpetually on the throb and the thrill; sometimes I almost envy the pressman's coloured spectacles that see sobs for him everywhere, and turn two cats strolling across the street into "Headlong Flight of Whole Feline Popula-

tion before Hun Hate." But the tragedy of life does not write itself up so blatantly, in huge letters like a bill-poster: it has to be read between the lines of things, cautiously and quietly.

2. UNDER THE PEAKS

It was a glorious run back, under the rim of the foothills to Vicenza again, though it is always with the pang of saying good-bye to a friend that I see Baldo passing out of sight. To make up, all the Summano-Pasubio masses, when we came abreast of them, were magnificent in clearness, and dazzling. This time we did not turn up into the bay of Schio, but kept straight out across the plain, round the feet of Summano towards the much bigger, solid bulk of the Cengio mass beyond. The strip of road between the two crosses the *débouchure* of the Astico Valley, and is fully commanded by the Austrians from the wicked little peak of Cimone, full in the middle of the leftward view (in so far as you can see it for the very heavy screens and valances with which the road is protected along here). But in the gaps you do get a beautiful new view up into the valleys and ranges into which we had looked so far down from Colletti. Colletti itself towers up behind in an impregnable wall overhead, tethering Summano to the chaotic castellated jumbles of Novegno and Priaforà; and then come the bulks of the big mountains, and in front, quite close, at the division of the valleys, the spiteful-looking peak of Cimone.

3. UP CENGIO

The high tops were all in snow, and the grassy flanks of their alps were pale brown with autumn. The

Cengio mass is not suggestive of alps at all; it is more like a steep down on a nightmare scale of size. One looks on it at first as a dull, stolid lump of no distinction, a mere hulk like poor Tom Bowling. Its size only begins to dawn when the magnificent new road starts serpentineing broadly up its flank, behind screens that keep each turn almost invisible from the last. It is an enormous climb, up the open grassy wall of the fell; and gradually, as you ascend, what had looked from below like a meek line of limestone rocks develops overhead into a precipice of gaunt crags. And this fell side is the outer wall of the Asiago plateau, holding it up from the plain all along to Valstagna. You reach the top through winding dips and gullies full of spruces, and now turned into a camp in every hole and hollow. After that the road undulates in the dark of the forest till you reach its lower verge and there is the wide shallow of the plateau lying in front of you.

4. THE ASIAGO PLATEAU

The Asiago plateau is much more like a plateau than anything which bears the name on the Isonzo front. But even so, what it is really much more like is a great saucer, embedded on a pedestal of mountains. They rise all round it in a quite shallow-looking waved rim, universally dark with fir forest: the wide green vale of the Upper Engadine will give you the impression of it, if you can rule out of your mind the big heights that hedge that; and substitute dull flat lines of hill that make the dip itself feel so much higher, as if you had come up to some very lofty place, close under the lid of the sky.

We came down through the jostled chaos of limestone

that fills the obscurity of the forest, and then through the goldening scrub of beech below. Here we alighted, and made our way through bewildering paddocks and mazes of barbed wire up on to an open shoulder of the slope, with the stemless thistle sitting flatly on the sere brown starvation of the turf, like great pantomime flowers carved in frosted silver, or fantastic white-metal lotuses floating on the face of the fields. The slopes were pitted with shell-holes, but otherwise the scene was hugely peaceful and empty like all these others, and even more comfortable in its amplitude of calm. For the Asiago plateau is in no way like anything on the Trentino or the Isonzo front. Here, except for the Dolomitic masses of the mountains over the Val Sugana, far away up on the left, all the surrounding hills are mere leisurely heavings round the leisurely central saucer of green meadows, more suggestive of winter sports than anything else.

There is not anything here of the austerity of the Carso, the ferocity of the Bainsizza, the crushing majesty of the Trentino. This is just a great tranquil upland vale, fast asleep among sleepy-looking sheets of dark woodland flowing up and down the heights all round: and the green expanse is peppered over with villages that look quite real, until you take the glasses and see that they are all eyeless, soulless, and dead, mere broken, empty hulks still standing stark among the meadows.

In the middle of the view, about a mile below, lay Asiago in the centre of the saucer, with its broken bridge across the darkness of the Assa gorge behind. And above, the fir-clad, low lines of the Boche heights. In a way the perfect, slumberous calm here was more evident and

oppressive than the haughty violence with which the Trentino Alps sweep the war out of your mind altogether with the mere ease of their own splendour. There was a malign blandness about this scene; it was like those slow-spoken, softly-smiling people whose sluggishness really masks a legion of devils.

5. STAGING OF DRAMAS

All this front seems, in fact, like *La Belle au Bois Dormant*. Even the Austrians seem also to be panoplied in tranquillity. Yet one feels that all this is superficial; and that many dramas are being got ready for staging in these countless busy camps on both sides, that lurk lost in the indistinguishable blackness of the forest. And, in a way, I got a new conception of the mountain war up here. Obvious frontal attacks and heroisms are what strike one so violently in the Isonzo and the Trentino; and therefore one grows depressed before the indefinite multiplicity of challenges that these Alps present. Only up here, in the gradualness of the Asiago hills, did I understand that perhaps I had come to overrate the importance and difficulty of peaks in themselves, and the terror of their multitude.

6. NEW LIGHTS ON MOUNTAIN WARFARE

Here one can see that the mountain war is a much bigger thing than mere taking of successive heights; that the attack is not so much met by defence as by counter-attack elsewhere. The real art of it lies in getting behind the enemy and cutting him off, rather than in mere frontal assaults, no matter how prestigious and heroic. In a way,

the other parts of the Italian front keep one obsessed with the melodramatic aspect of the warfare; I never saw behind into the vast mechanism of the real thing until I came up here into a quieter scene, undistracted by the obviousnesses of peaks and precipices.

All the time there is fighting going on — shell-fire and hand-to-hand attacks. The Austrians achieved one very brilliant stroke along here. They used their big guns as spades. From beyond the valley they fired a quantity of huge shells all along in a line, so as to dig a chain of hollows across the fell, which then served as front-line trenches for the rush to occupy and hold. We went down a little way from here, into the rolling green plain of Asiago. All the roads are densely screened in a wattling of fir-boughs, and into Asiago itself it would not be well to penetrate. But we traversed many of the minor villages, all paneless and hammered and empty, yet still so easily reparable that you might call them virtually intact. It may be that this is only because they were better built and of solider material than some of the little flimsy red-brick places in Flanders: anyhow, their solemn, silent emptiness is even more gaunt and ghostly in its way, from the very fact of there being so much more of them left. It is like passing down streets of skulls; while the Somme villages are undiscoverable dust and ashes.

7. THE WOODLANDS

After this we undulated upwards again into the woodland zone. It is a wilderness of dells and hollows, under the gloom of the fir forest. In one very pleasant glade the Italians have buried the dead Austrians in a

neat little cemetery with fine solid wooden crosses, and have made elaborate patterns in white pebbles on every mound. But soon we deserted the fringes of the alp and took to the heart of the woods again. It is a sombre and sinister maze of ups and downs, in the icy-breathing black twilight of the universal fir forest which along here entirely clothes the limestone tumbles and mossy hummocks that make the rim of the plateau all along. It is dense and deep and secret upon you, as if you were blinded under a universal tarpaulin thrown over the hills: and in this serried obscurity some of the most terrible fighting of all the war took place in 1916 — primeval rough-and-tumbles with knives, among the dips and dingles. There was no plan or order or particular objective; it was mere personal killing and killing, a blank obscurity of slaughter. Whole troops went lost in the uncharted wilderness of the crowded tree-trunks; there is an awful sameness among them that would drive one mad to be lost in; you cannot see ahead anywhere, and soon become obliterated in the universal sameness of the green midnight, with nowhere anything to give any anchorage or direction. It must have been like drowning in midocean. And drown the fighters did, by troops; and the unnumbered dead lay lost for months in the deeps of the boscage, and down in the clefts of the grey limestone boulders with which the whole forest is abristle.

Even now it has not lost its haunting horror, though the scene has changed. The new roads are churned kennels of mud, and there are base camps everywhere, and frequent mossy cemeteries in the silent dark of the firs, and cities of hutments mounted high on stilts to be above the winter snow, and batteries of water-cisterns, and big drums of

water being carried up on motor-lorries. It is a forbidding, evil land, in fact, whether full of life or full of death. It is friendlier to death than to life. For there is no water here, and every drop of it has to be conveyed; and though the elevation is absurdly low, the specially notorious bitter cold of the Asiago plateau would do credit to many a place thousands of feet higher. A very cheerless winter sojourn, in the unrelievable monotony of blackness under the serried pines.

8. THE RIM OF THE HIGHLAND

Gradually we drew down over the top of the rim towards its outward fall to the plain, and the tyranny of the trees began to diminish. Here there were numbers of rest-camps on a huge scale, and men innumerable at play. And then, in a moment, we were free of the dark woodland and out on the actual brink; and there was all the plain — all the whole world it might have been — incredibly laid out before us, incredibly far below, delicately mapped and richly coloured, under the infinite radiance of the sky.

I am always coming on things so beautiful that they obliterate everything else from my brain. Down and down, in vast slants across the face of the grassy green alp we magnificently careered; and the glory of it all kept me vacantly gasping like a fish. The road is as noble as if a Roman Emperor had built it, but it is only yet another of the many that the war has bred, and that will have to go back to nothingness again, unless they themselves, in due course, can manage to breed hotels. This one, I should think, might; you could not have nobler air or a nobler view than from this bare high down-front looking out

over all North Italy — North Italy's very last edge of defence, too, against the hostile mountains behind.

9. DOWN AGAIN, AND HOME

Erelong you come down upon a colossal pavement of flat, crevassed limestone, that if it were not so enormous, and set at a steep tilt, and powdered with a golden scrub of little wind-battered beeches, would put you absolutely in mind of the limestone pedestal of Simonstone. It gave one a very triumphant feeling, to go swerving and swooping down that splendid scene, with such an infinity of distance beyond and below, and the Brento and the Astico glimmering away like varying silver threads in the plain. The drop is long and far; through San Giacomo di Lusiana perched on an arêted projection; and then winding behind the Santa Caterina spur of the multiple mountain-side, in a shelving wilderness of dells and dales and hollows of greenery and hayfield, now close-cropped to pasture; till all the scene was like a cataclysmal upheaval of lawn into vivid emerald mounts and mounds and folds and ridges with the rim of the plateau like the wall of heaven overhead. And after that there remains only Marostica, at your feet, tentatively climbing the hill from the plain, with its unbroken old precinct of wall and square red towers.

Our homeward way skirted the mountains all along. It was, of course, the same that we had so sadly traversed in the wet; and now, immeasurably glorious in the sundown, and perfectly peaceful, — except for a body of Alpini, mounted on bicycles, who met us near Bassano. The journey is like a geography lesson come to life; and throughout

the first half of it you are always getting tantalizing glimpses up through breaks in the foothill wall, to real tumbled masses of Dolomite, grim in the sundown, not certainly to be recognized, unless one of them may have indeed been Pelmo, somewhere vaguely above the direction of Agordo and Belluno. Then Montebelluna, Conegliano, Pordenone, and through the melodramatic loveliness of Sacile, and across the age-long bridge of the Piave; and back into Udine by dark.

October 25

10. MERE DOUBTS

I have been again on to the Carso, — since then, too, — and up to San Michele, where, for the first time in Italy I saw grave-crosses dotted among the tussocks and boulders as you do on the Somme. In Monfalcone we peered out from an observation-post in a house, but there was too much firing going on for us to revisit the ship. Altogether I do not know what to make of matters. It is ridiculous to pretend that there are not things going on, and things going to happen. I find a great change come over the atmosphere since I was away in the Trentino. I cannot call it nervousness; but it is not complacency. I begin to ask, "What would happen — if . . ." and the answer now is a shrug. Anyhow, whatever they told me or did not tell me the evidence of my own ears would keep me informed. The air is heavy now with the continued booming of the guns; Gorizia and the Carso and Monfalcone are much less healthy places to visit than they were a week ago. It is not that we are anxious in any way, really; but we have a little the feeling of being shut up in

the greenroom while the next act is being staged. All the more so, perhaps, for the careful glimpses with which we are indulged.

A staff officer came and gave us an address to-night, on what has been happening up on the Isonzo. I felt to be assisting at the making of history. I suppose he only told us what we are wanted to know, but anyhow there is now no doubt that the Austrians are moving in a huge but tentative push upon the Caporetto-Tolmino line where the Italian Second Army is; and that they are being largely assisted by Boches released from that wretched Russian front. I do not imagine that anything will come of it; but of course the situation has its gravity, and the Italians here are facing it with a perfectly grave calm that is nothing like fear, but is nothing like overweening cock-a-whoopness either. I think it is fine and characteristic of them to be so frank in telling me so much about the dangers as well as the hopes of the situation.

II. ON THE CASTELLO

On the way home I went up on to the castello. It was a wild grey night of level cloud, and the booming of the guns went on the whole time, remote and continuous, with now and then especially shattering explosions that seemed to shake the place. And all down the Carso the great red flashes stained the clouds in rapidly repeated blurs; and behind the nearer hills there hung an enormous, pervasive, rosy glare that must mean the burning of some particularly big dump. There is no town that could be on fire, I am glad to think.

I go down to Venice to-morrow.

*Hotel Daniele, Venice**October 26, 1917*

12. IN VENICE

No news. Everything serene and beautiful. Venice has a crystalline emptiness now which allows you to see it as it really is, without being distracted by crowds of people who do not belong there. Now it is in a pause of development, isolated, living on itself and by itself. The worst of this is that in the complete cessation of tourist traffic and outside intercourse, all the parasites who used to live on that traffic are now left stranded; and the result is that you cannot so much as stop to do up your shoe by a lamp-post, without some moss-grown old man springing up mysteriously out of the ground at you like a mushroom, and pestering to show you things. I hate being shown things; one never sees them. So that getting a sight of St. Mark's or anything else is like lying in wait to catch a snap-shot of a Tibetan. You stare round diligently at everything except the one thing you wish to see; and then, in a flash, swing the camera of your glance, and touch off the picture instantly before you bolt. For as sure as you linger one instant too long, some mildewed old dodderer will have darted on you round the corner.

13. ST. MARK'S

Not that there is very much to be shown, anyhow, — Venice is all packed up. Inside St. Mark's the edifices of sandbags arranged in a kind of honeycomb of shelves really achieve quite classically fine new architectural forms, of buttress and bastion and column: everything else is

either hidden or taken away; even the statues are all built up like rows of big beehives or cornstooks; and the great bronze horses of the Emperor Nero are gone to a safer stable. There is nothing now in St. Mark's to distract one any more from the mosaics of the domes. The Italians do not grudge Austria her bombings of Venice, in fact, which *is* a big military centre; but what they do grudge is that that bombardment does not even pretend to restrict itself honestly to the military centre, out at the Arsenal, quite obvious and isolated; but drops its bombs promiscuously over the whole city in a manifest intention to destroy. No amount of sandbagging could protect the actual domes of St. Mark's. And a bomb, indeed, did actually light in front of the great door, but it was a white sheep in its black Boche brood, and declined to go off. Should another come, though, and be of whole-hearted Boche nature, nothing whatever could save those ninefold domes — I suppose the very culmination of their kind, if it were not for the blinded glories of Agia Sophia, and Their Imperial Æternities, its authors, in San Vitale. I think, as it is, that the huge and solemn golden twilight (for the glass has been replaced with yellow screening) and the dark heavy silence in St. Mark's are all the more impressive for the place being now so bald and empty. It is really an Imperial tomb to-day, and not the mere copy of one: you do feel to be standing in the Holy Apostles at Constantinople, with all the Roman Emperors and Empresses round you in their huge marble arks. And overhead that soaring weight of purple and gold; mosaics that really are mosaic and look like it: instead of trying to be bad imitations of worse pictures, like the seventeenth-eighteenth century horrors lower down.

14. IN VENICE

And then you emerge from Constantinople and are on the Venetian Piazza again, with crowds going about happily, and all the pigeons in grey flights, and the stark, irrelevant brutality of the new Campanile, breaking straight up out of the ground like a phallic mushroom, without explanation or pedestal or pause, in an outburst of squat, square solidity. As for the Ducal Palace, all the long arcades are built up with bricks and scaffolding and sandbags in the middle of each arch; the upper ones are transformed by their protective woodwork into a long, stately line of looped eyes, as if peering out from crucifixes, except that the crucifix has no arms, and looks more like an Ankh with the branches lopped.

Last night there was a brilliant moon, but no raid. They say that nothing in the world can be more beautiful to see than an air-raid on Venice, and her air-defences, on a night of full moon. Certainly nothing could be more beautiful than the mere moonlight here, anyhow, on the Piazza, with St. Mark's like a Byzantine fairy tale in silver-filigree, and the smell of all the air so haunting in its soft deliciousness, tantalizingly corrupt. Searchlights waver and die over the distance, promenading great dim bubbles of illumination across the floor of the cloud-layers; and underneath there came a plane buzzing, with a brilliant eye of green light at one wing-tip, and another of yellow at the other, like a tropical firefly with eyes that do not match.

Everything seems very quiet and secure: I imagine that Venice feels herself as safe as any city can — except from

air-raids. The people all look cheerful and sensible and much as usual; the main current of shopping traffic still flows like a spate. But in the back streets there are queues of women to be seen, waiting their turn at the *polenta* shops. Many of these are in black, tired-looking, white-haired, and haggard; you *could* make a pathetic picture out of them. But black may mean economy quite as much as mourning, and waiting one's turn is nowhere an exhilarating process; and these women are ready enough with a laugh or a joke whenever they get the chance. As for the restaurants, there are only two now going, and only one to which any one goes; and there they tell you loudly that you cannot have this and that — and then come closer and tell you softly that you can. In the afternoon there are almost the usual crowds of people sitting out in the Piazza over drinks and *apéritifs* and tea, and arid little war-buns, and fat slabs of bread and ham. Nobody looks particularly anxious or war-logged; yet I suppose there must be a feeling of impatience for the afternoon *communiqué*. . . .

15. THE CRASH

. . . It has come, it is worse than anything I had ever dared to dread. When they talk of having to provide for the evacuation of the Bainsizza, that must mean that the very worst has happened, and that all the mountains of the Isonzo and the Carso are going or gone. It was like sitting in the middle of a world that quite abruptly crumbles. I think every one was paralyzed. Dense crowds gathered and melted in mobs before the window in which the *communiqué* was pasted; but there was a stricken lethargy of calm everywhere. Of course, the one alleviation about

a blow is that it can never be appreciated as quickly as it is given.

One cannot fully receive it, because one's whole soul fights against it. "Which fiddle-strings is weakness to expredge my nerves that night." . . .

Yours

R. F.

Hotel Ritz, Paris

October 30, 1917

16. THE WORST

This is really only a postscript, while the rush and the hatefulness are still fresh upon me. Of the news itself you will already know a great deal more than I do. When one is in the middle of the storm one is swept away, and cannot see its details as one can from a distance. Anyhow, the *communiqué* of the 27th was no better, with the line broken, and the Second Army gone rotten, and the very plain threatened, and Venice herself in danger, and her people beginning to talk of packing up for flight.

It has all happened with such a violent suddenness that I can hardly believe it even yet; but I must. Not a week since, I was up myself on Bainsizza and Monte Santo and taking lunch in Gorizia! Even now in the wreck of everything, I cannot help clinging to the memory of my own amazing luck in having been there at the very last possible moment.

As for the Venetians, I do not know what one should expect of a population in such a juncture. There *must* be a black, universal load of misery and anxiety abroad; but runnings-about and screamings and hysterics certainly

would not have done any good. I suppose I was cheated by our old conventional notion of the Southern races as so excitable compared with our own Northern calm, but I certainly thought that this people in general would rise more obviously to the anguish of the moment. Instead of which the most perfect order and self-control prevailed: there could not well have been worse news; and you could not have desired any people in the world to take it better.

17. CALM IN STORM

I left Venice about eight on the night of the 27th, and I have only just arrived in Paris. The platform at Mestre was one seething mob. I was suddenly meeting the advance guard of a whole nation in retreat. All the Venetian Plain was flooding back, in fact, on Rome and Venice, from before the Boche advance. Cividale was burned (it must have been the burning of Cividale that I had seen from the Castello of Udine), and Udine itself evacuated at an hour or two's notice, long trainfuls of children first, and then the women, and then everybody else as best they could, before the Turks and Austrians rode in. (Yes, the Austrians sent on Turkish troops to take Udine, a characteristically endearing touch of thought-out tact.) The chaos was like nothing one could have imagined, and all the time packed trains of soldiers went clanking slowly through on their way to the front. (It was a little late for locking the stable door, though.) But the press and the mob were extraordinarily impressive. Uprooted and sent flying all in a minute as the people had been, with what of their worldly goods they could clutch and nothing else, it

was inspiring to see how self-possessed and sensible they all still appeared to be. Excited and fluttered, yes, — as well they might be; but neither weighed down into apathy by despair, nor inflated to hysteria by panic.

The slow hours seethed by in utter confusion. And when at last the sleeping-car train from Udine came in, it was so crowded with refugees that there was no more standing-room in it anywhere. However, at Mestre they all disembarked, and ultimately I was established in my compartment. When I woke, it was to a weeping morning, and the train was crawling out of Verona, past Desenzano and the veiled lake, in a hopeless lethargy of weariness, stopping twice, with jerks and clanks of anguish, at every station; and constantly held up along the line by troop-trains hurrying off to keep the disaster fed.

18. MILAN AND TURIN

We reached Milan, of course, far too late for any connection. For hours we prowled the curiously forbidding streets, so dour and unfriendly. And still you could not have guessed from the popular demeanour that dust and ashes were abroad. The principal thing that struck me in Milan, as soon as one had survived the accumulated horror of the Duomo, was the number and the gorgeousness of the sweet-shops and the confectioners. The next train was even slower and more tired than the last, and took much longer to rest at every station. At every station, as we began to approach Turin, there was a dense crowd of third-class passengers, returning into the city from their Sunday out in the country, as unconcerned and hilarious as if nothing were happening in the world anywhere nearer

than Peking. And at length the train, in every compartment, was as thick with holiday-makers as those from Udine with the flying population of Venetia.

19. THE INDESTRUCTIBLE VISION

Turin gave me a day of blazing glory and wretchedness. I do not want often to have to live through such hours of helpless misery again, as hour by hour worse news came in. There was only one thing that comforted me, as at last we moved out into the sunset. Halfway up the sky, silhouetted in the faintest warm lavender on the suffused rosy glare of the west, the perfect peak of the Viso hovered more beautiful than any picture in a dream. Below there were veils of haze filling everything; the peak soared quite detached, barely visible, up among enormous tangled masses of rose-pink cloud, with others of deep black darkness blocking the foreground of the sky to the right, hemmed with violent rims of gold that radiated dim golden shafts up into the zenith: earthwards they merged darkly into the foothills, which were of the deepest deep pure blue, sinking to the viridian line of the poplars and hedges, pale and clear against the murk of the plain.

It was one of the most completely beautiful things I have ever seen and, as such, a real stoppage of pain. While such things still occur, and one still has eyes to see them one cannot ever be wholly disconsolate in life, I hope and believe and feel.

20. MODANE

At Modane I was once more in England, and was submerged in the delight of being at home again. It was an

impressive enough moment to be in Modane, anyhow. The disaster was not yet forty-eight hours old, yet already both France and England were sending whole armies thundering through to the rescue. All other traffic was gone by the board; and that dreary dust-bin of a place was now a roaring channel spouting down two kingdoms to the aid of another. I was told that France alone was putting through some fourteen thousand men a day. Tired, dour, and difficult in pride as France may sometimes be, she certainly has the secret of an inexhaustible magnificence, never more arrogantly inexhaustible than when she most plausibly might be thought exhausted.

21. RESPONSIBILITY

I got back here the next morning, having taken four days to get from Venice to Paris. And if I had started from Venice only a few hours later, I probably should not have got through at all. The culmination of everything I had seen is utter, absolute disaster. Everything seems to have broken to pieces. And yet, even already, I am quite certain that nothing has.

If only this breakdown will shock all of us into realizing the awful peril of letting weariness corrupt our minds to the point of weakening! It only needs a doubt, a wavering, a moment's yielding to depression, and one may be doing one's little worst to give away everything and undo everything, and betray the past and the present and the whole future, — the dead, the living, and all the generations to come. It is not that I want to preach, or overstate things: but I am really frightened by this Italian business. It seems to throw such a huge new responsibility on one's

own personal firmness in courage and conviction and optimism. When you are halfway across a plank bridge over an abyss, it is no time to begin wobbling. In any case, I can draw the rest of the moral when I see you, which will be quite soon, I hope, as now I am straight for home.

22. AU REVOIR

Good-bye, then, for the present.

Yours

R. F.

THE END

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